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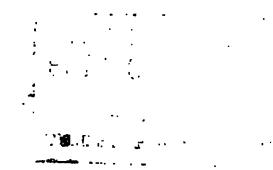




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THE CLAN CALL





“‘Hold up the white flag, John Moreland——hurry!’”

The Clan Call

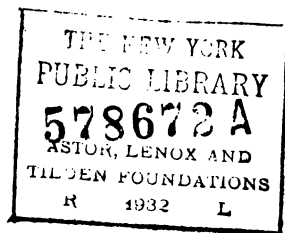
By
Hapsburg Liebe



Frontispiece
by
Ralph Pallen Coleman

L.C.

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ROY VAN
SLIP
PAGE

TO MY MOTHER

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THE CLAN CALL

THE CLAN CALL

CHAPTER I

DAVID MORELAND'S MOUNTAIN

CARLYLE WILBURTON DALE—known to himself and a few close friends as Bill Dale—had laid out a course of action almost before the northbound train had left the outskirts of the State capital behind. It incurred facing big odds; but other men had faced big odds and won out, and what others had done he could do. Indeed, he had already done several things which other men might not have thought of doing, and one of them was the leaving of a bride, not figuratively but literally, at the altar in a fashionable church! But he knew Patricia hadn't wanted to marry him any more than he had wanted to marry her.

It was only natural for him to think of coal, now that he had cut loose for all time from the "set" in which he had always been a colossal misfit, now that he must pull his own oars or virtually perish. He had heard coal talked since the day of his birth; to him coal and business meant exactly the same. His thoughts ran backward. . . .

One of his father's associates had often spoken of a fine vein in the mountains of eastern Tennessee—had often tried to persuade his father to look into it, to no avail. Young Dale remembered that this vein lay not far from a long railroad siding called the Halfway Switch, in the vicinity of Big Pine Mountain. The owners were mountainfolk of English descent, his father's associate had said. Decidedly strange, thought Dale, that his father had never cared to investigate it.

It was growing late. Dale and the midnight hour had always been strangers. He drew the rim of his soft hat over his eyes, lay back on the red cushions, and let the monotonous click!-click! of the railjoints below lull him to sleep.

The cindery little train reached the long siding about the middle of the following morning. Dale took up his bag, hastened out, and soon found himself standing alone in the heart of an extremely wild section of country. But it was a beautiful country. Great rugged, forest-covered, green hills reared their heads on all sides; everywhere he saw the gorgeous flowers of the laurel, the royal purple of the redbud, the golden yellow of the wild honeysuckle, the dainty white stars of the puccoons, and giant ferns—it was June in the mountains, too.

When the noises of the little train and the fast mail it had just met had died away, there came the saucy chattering of boomer-squirrels and the sweet twittering of birds. Dale caught the joyous spirit. He could have fairly shouted out of the fullness of his very human heart. Here all was unspoiled and unprofaned, and something whispered within him:

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"They won't call you a savage here—make this your own country!"

From somewhere on a nearby mountainside a rifle's keen report split the air; a bullet whined like a mad hornet; Dale's hat jumped a little on his head.

The awakening was exceedingly rude. Dale wheeled, his grey eyes ablaze, and saw only a tiny cloud of smoke-mist rising from the laurels more than fifty feet away.

"Come out, you coward!" he roared. "Come out and let me see you," curiosity taking the place of anger in his voice. "I've always wanted to know just what a real highwayman was like!"

The muffled sound of a twig breaking a short distance off to his left next claimed his attention. He was being closely watched by a pair of the finest, clearest brown eyes he had ever seen. He saw her eyes first; he never forgot that.

She was standing on a low cliff beyond the sparkling creek that flowed beside the railroad, and she was partially hidden by a clump of blooming laurel. But Dale could see that she was about twenty; that every line of her rounded, graceful figure whispered of a doelike strength; that she was as straight as a young pine; that her chestnut-brown hair caught the sunlight, and that her face was oval-shaped and handsome—rather than pretty—in spite of its tan. She was barefooted, and her dress was a simple thing of white-dotted blue calico.

Dale took off his hat. There was a bullet hole in the very top of its high-peaked crown.

"Who's the robber?" he frowned.

The girl blushed.

"Mebbe he ain't a robber," she said. "Mebbe he thought you was somebody else. Anyhow, you ain't bad hurt, are ye?"

Dale smiled. "Oh, not seriously!"

"You ain't likely to be, ef ye behave yeself."

"If I behave myself——!" Dale laughed. "Why, I couldn't be naughty if I tried; I'm the one and only mamma's little Willie-boy! I wonder if I could put up at some house near here; eh?"

A spirit of mischief shone in the young woman's hazel eyes.

"Put up what?" she asked, revealing two rows of perfect teeth kept perfectly white by the constant use of a spicewood toothbrush.

"I mean stop—er, stay for a few days, you know."

"The' might be," thoughtfully.

"Where?"

"At pap's, or grandpap's, or with 'most any o' my people; or," she added with a contemptuous twist to her lips, "you might stay with some o' them lowdown Morelands."

"Where do your people live?"

"About six mile back that way." She pointed over her shoulder with a forefinger.

"Six miles!" exclaimed Dale. "And how does one go, please, ma'am?"

"Walk," quickly. "The trail ain't more'n a foot wide, but the's been bigger men 'an you travelled it."

"Am I to understand that you have walked that far this morning?" asked Dale.

"Yes," answered the young woman.

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"It must be something important."

"Yes," she replied. "To see the trains pass, fo' one thing."

"Would you mind showing me the way to your parental domicile?"

"What's that, fo' goodness' sake?"

"Your home, you know," Dale explained with a smile.

"Oh, my home. Why didn't ye say so then? No, I won't," she declared.

Dale put his bag down and rested his hands on his hips.

"Why, may I enquire?"

"'Cause I won't. I don't never keep comp'ny with no strange menfolks. But yander comes By, and he'll show ye the way; he's a-goin' over to the settlement."

Dale faced to the right and saw, coming toward him with steps that would have measured almost four feet, the tallest and lankiest individual he had ever seen outside a circus. The newcomer had a smoothly-shaven chin, his coal-black hair was long and his long moustache completely hid the narrow slit that was his mouth. In one hand he carried a repeating rifle.

"Who's that?" Dale half whispered.

"That's By Heck," answered the girl. She continued in a low voice, "His name's Sam Heck; but pap he called him 'By Heck' one day, and the nickname stuck to him like molasses. Everybody calls him that now, even the revenuers. By, he's the biggest eater, and the biggest liar, in the world! But his lyin' don't never do no harm, and nobody keers. So ef ye want to go to the settlement, Mister, By, he'll take ye over. They mebbe

ain't got what you're used to fo' eatin', but ye'll be welcome to what the' is."

She seemed more inclined toward being friendly now. Her voice had become soft and musical. Although Dale did not suspect it, the change had been made in the sacred name of hospitality—most mountainfolk being long on hospitality.

She laughed a little, turned, and disappeared among the blooming laurels.

The man By Heck wore the poor clothing of a poor hillman. His hat, which had once been black, was all brim and yet all crown; his suspenders, which had been bought with a 'coonhide, were redder than fire; his run-down cowhide boots seemed ridiculously short because of the great length of his slender legs.

When he had reached a point some three yards from Dale, he halted, placed the butt of his rifle carefully between his toes, and leaned on its muzzle; then he deliberately began to take eye measurements of the newcomer, and there was not much about Dale's exterior that escaped his keen scrutiny.

Dale didn't like the stare—to him it was impudent.

"Well, what's the verdict?" he asked sharply.

"Spoke like a man," drawled By Heck. "I reckon you must be up here a-lookin' fo' coal."

"How did you reach such a conclusion as that?"

"Jest plain hoss sense." The drooping moustache muffled the words somewhat. "The' ain't but three things 'at can bring a city man here, Mister," he drawled on, "and them's moonshine stills, bad health, and coal. You shore ain't got bad health, and you

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ain't got the cut of a revenuer, though a few minutes ago I thought mebbe ye was."

"And you shot at me!" said Dale.

"No," objected Heck. "I shot at yore hat. I allus hits at what I shoots at, Mister. I wanted ye to turn yore face, so's I could see it, and ye did. As fo' that coal——

"The Morelands they owns the coal in David Moreland's Mountain, and they won't sell it fo' no 'mount o' money. They lives over in the settlement, them and the Littlefords. The settlement it lays atween David Moreland's Mountain and the Big Pine, in a purty green valley. Doe River runs atween the Morelands and the Littlefords. They're every danged one fine folks. I'm a-goin' over thar now. Want to go 'long? Say—dang my picture ef I didn't fo'git to ax what might be yore name, Mister!"

"Bill Dale," came quickly—"Bill Dale. Settlement? Sure! ' Lead the way, By Heck. Who's the young woman I was talking with when you came up?"

"Who? Her? That's old Ben Littleford's gyurl. Her name's Babe. That's what they call her. She's got another name; but it ain't been used fo' so long it's been fo'got, I reckon. She's the youngest one o' old Ben's children. I reckon mother'd know her name, a-seein' she knows everything else. Mother she's the settlement's forchune-teller, and I'm the settlement's whiskey-maker; dang my picture ef I cain't make twenty-year-old yaller cawn whiskey in a day and a half! Wisht I may die ef I cain't. I makes whiskey fo' both sides of 'em. But Babe——

"Well, Babe she's sort o' odd, somehow. She hain't

like none o' the rest o' the Littlefords. By gosh, she's awful high-headed. She can read good, Babe can. Old Major Bradley, from down at Cartersville in the lowland, he spends his summers up here fo' his health, and he teached Babe how to read. Fine feller, Major Bradley. Lawyer. Babe she has done read everything in the whole danged country. The's sev'ral Bibles, and a book about a Pilgrim's Prog-ress, and a Baker's Hoss and Cattle Almaneck, and a dic-tionary. But the' ain't nothin' much in the dictionary, I 'low. Babe she comes over here to git newspapers to read. The' used to be a old trainman who'd throw off newspapers here fo' her to git. I reckon he must done be dead now, but Babe jest keeps on a-comin'. Everybody, igod, likes Babe.

"But we'd better light out fo' the settlement, Mr. Bill, or we'll miss dinner, mebbe. I'm a plumb danged fool about eatin'. I e't twenty-two biscuits o' flour-bread this mornin' fo' breakfus', asides a whole b'iled hamshank, and other things accordin'. It's the dyin' truth! Come on, Mr. Bill."

They went down to the creek, crossed it on stones, and began to climb the low cliff. Soon they had entered a narrow, winding trail that led upward at a gradual slant, and Dale had to do some of the best walking of his life in order to keep pace with his long-legged guide.

After an hour's travelling, Heck stopped in the trail and put the butt of his rifle to the ground.

"From right here, Bill," he said, "we can see every house in the whole danged settlement."

They were standing on the crest of David Moreland's Mountain. Below them lay a broad valley checkered with small farms; and each farm had its log cabin, its

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log barn and its apple orchard. Growing corn and wheat filled the fields; the fragrant green meadows along the clear and beautiful, sycamore-lined little river were dotted here and there with grazing cows. Beyond it all rose the great and majestic Big Pine, which was higher and more rugged with cliffs than David Moreland's Mountain.

"The Morelands lives on this side o' the river, and the Littlefords lives on yan side," drawled Heck. "They don't never have nothin' to do with each other, but they don't hardly ever fight; they're all strappin' big men, and they fights so danged hard it don't pay. My gosh, Bill, every man of 'em can shoot a gnat's eyelash off at four hundred yards—I wisht I may drap dead ef they cain't! Do ye see that big cabin right plumb in the middle o' the nigh half o' the settlement, Bill? Well, the boss o' the Morelands he lives thar. John Moreland. That's whar you want to go, Bill, sence ye've got a oncyorable case o' the disease knowed as coal-on-the-brain. But I can tell ye aforehand, you ain't got enough money to buy that coal, don't matter how much money ye've got. Dadburn my picture ef I don't know edzactly what I'm a-talkin' about!"

Dale was not looking toward John Moreland's home now. His gaze had wandered to the other side of the river. By Heck waited a full minute for a reply to his speech, then spoke again:

"The gyurl, or the coal—is that what's a-botherin' ye, Bill?"

Dale's eyes twinkled. "Must I choose between them?" he laughed.

"Shore!" By Heck wasn't even smiling. "Shore!

The Morelands and Littlefords hates each other wuss nor a blue-tailed hawk hates a crow. The gyurl, or the coal, Bill?"

"We'll go down to John Moreland's," announced Dale.

The mountaineer took up his rifle. "Let me gi' ye a word or two o' warnin'," he continued seriously. "Don't you offer to pay John Moreland fo' eatin' his grub, nor fo' sleepin' in his bed, nor fo' chawin' his tobacker. Ef ye do, yore goose will shore be cooked with John Moreland. But ef ye was to brag on the vittles a little, John's wife a-bein' pow'ful handy in the kitchen, it wouldn't do a danged bit o' harm. Do ye understand it all now, Bill?"

Dale nodded, and they began the descent.

John Moreland's house was built of whole oak logs, which were chinked with oak splits and daubed in between with clay; the roof was of handmade boards, and a chimney of stones and clay rose at either end. There was a front porch and a back porch, the ends of which were completely closed in by walls of blooming honeysuckles. The yard was filled with all manner of old-fashioned flowers.

John Moreland himself sat on the front porch, and beside him lay a repeating rifle, two young squirrels that had been very neatly shot through the head, and a weary black-and-tan hound. He was an uncommonly big man, and about forty-seven; his eyes were grey and keen; his thick hair and full beard were a rich brown, with only a few threads of white. He wore boots, brown corduroy trousers, a blue flannel shirt, and a broad-rimmed black hat; his belt was a cartridge belt. There

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was a certain English fineness about the man. One felt that he could trust John Moreland.

As the moonshiner and his companion reached the gate, Moreland rose and pushed his hat back from his forehead.

"Hi, John," grinned Heck. "This here feller wants to stay with ye a few days, John. Seems to be all right."

"Come right in," invited the chief of the Morelands. He indicated the home-made chair he had just vacated. "Set down thar and rest, stranger. I'll be back in a minute or so."

He hastened into the cabin, carrying the squirrels with him.

"He's went to tell his wife to hatch up a extry good dinner, Bill," whispered Heck. "Pepper-cyored ham, young chicken, hot biscuits, fresh butter, wild honey, huckleberry pie and peach pie and strawberry preserves—Bill, I cain't hardly stand it. Blast my picture ef I couldn't eat two whole raw dawgs right now, I'm that digbusted hongry. Well, I got to ramble on home. I live down the river half a mile, we and my maw. Come to see me, Bill, and we'll go a-fishin'. Say—afore I fo'git it; don't you mention to John about me a-sayin' I was the settlement's whisky-maker; he might not like it. They don't drink much here—jest a little snort afore breakfus', sometimes. So long, Bill old boy!"

John Moreland returned presently. The man from the city rose and proffered his hand.

"My name," he began, old habit strong upon him, "is Carlyle——"

Before he could get any farther with it, John Moreland flung the hand from him as though it were a thing of unspeakable contamination. His bearded face went deathly white with the whiteness of an old and bitter hatred. His great fists clenched, and every muscle in his giant body trembled.

"What's the matter, man?" Dale wanted to know.

"Carlyle!" Moreland repeated in a hoarse growl.

"You say yore name is *Carlyle!*"

"Yes," wonderingly, "but that's only a part of it. My name is Carlyle Wilburton Dale—Bill Dale. What's the matter?"

"Did you come from West Virginny?" sharply.

Dale gave the name of his home town and State.

"That's dif'rent." The mountaineer's countenance became lighter. "This man I'm a-thinkin' about, he was from West Virginny. I hope you won't hold nothin' ag'in me fo' actin' up that away. I couldn't he'p it, shore, it seems. You'll know how I felt when I tell ye about it, Mr. Dale. I owe it to ye to explain. Jest a minute——"

He stepped into the cabin and brought out another chair, sat down heavily and crossed his legs. Dale, too, sat down.

"The mountain you had to come over to come here, Mr. Dale," Moreland began, his big voice filled with an old, old sorrow, "is knowed as David Moreland's Mountain mostly because David Moreland is buried in the very highest place on the top of it, him and his wife. He was my brother, and he was the best brother a man ever had. It was allus the talk o' the neighbourhood, how much we liked each other. Up ontel the time

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he was married, I went with him whar he went, and he went with me whar I went. I'd fight fo' him, and he'd fight fo' me. It's hard to tell, even atter this long time. . . .

"David, he was a strappin' big man, like all o' the Morelands. He was about yore size, and grey-eyed like you, and he had brown hair like you. He was big through the shoulders like you, and tall like you. When you walked up to the gate, it made me think o' him the day he was married; he was all dressed up in dark blue like you. . . . Then David he went up here one summer and found this vein o' coal. He got lawful p'session o' the mountain, and moved his wife up here. The rest of us lived over in the Laurel Fork country then.

"One day I got a letter from David, which said that a man named John K. Carlyle was a-go'in' to buy his mountain and the coal, and said that his wife was pow'ful sick. A week later she died, and left a baby which died, too, accordin' to a old Injun by the name o' Cherokee Joe, who knowed my pap and knowed David. And a month later we was all dragged from our beds by this same Cherokee Joe, tellin' us that Carlyle had shot David. Carlyle, Cherokee Joe said, was a-drinkin' hard. The Injun seed the shootin' through a window.

"It was might' nigh it three days later when we got here and found pore David a-layin' whar he'd fell. We scoured the mountains fo' miles and miles around in a s'arch fo' the dawg who killed him, but we never found him. . . . The land up here looked purty, and

it belonged to us by David's death; so we all moved up here to live, and built us cabins.

"Major Bradley found out about the end o' my brother, and he wanted us to put the case in the hands o' the law. But we wouldn't do it. A Moreland never goes to law about anything. He pays his own debts, and he collects what is his due——"

John Moreland arose and paced the porch floor, which creaked under his weight. He stopped before Dale, and went on sadly:

"Now ye'll know why I was so much tore up when I heered yore name, the Carlyle part. John K. Carlyle killed the best man 'at ever lived. And mebbe ye'll onderstand why we ain't never had the conscience to sell the coal, which cost Brother David his life."

Moreland's guest sat staring absently toward a brown-winged butterfly that was industriously sipping honey from the heart of a honeysuckle bloom. He gave no sign that he had heard anything out of the ordinary, but in an odd, persistent way his mind seemed to connect his father, John K. Dale, with the story he had just heard.

John K. Dale had come originally from West Virginia, and he had flatly refused, time upon time, to make any investigation of the Moreland coal property.

The hillman interrupted young Dale's thinking:

"Addie, she's a-goin' to have dinner ready purty soon. Would ye like to wash, Mr. Dale?"

"Yes," was the answer, and in the tones of Bill Dale's quiet voice there was a shade of meaning that Moreland did not catch. "Yes, I'd like to wash."

CHAPTER II

IN THE CUP

DALE found the humble home of his mountaineer host a home in the fullest sense of the word. The utter honesty and simplicity of it, and the absence of everything that was not necessary, gave it a certain charm.

At the noonday meal, Dale met Mrs. Moreland and the sons of the household, and they were exactly as he had pictured them. Mrs. Moreland was quiet, motherly, always smiling, as straight and real as her husband. The sons, Caleb and Luke, were as much alike as the fingers on your hands; they were tall and broad-shouldered, grey-eyed and brown-haired.

Before sundown Dale had become acquainted with the rest of the Morelands, and he liked them, every one. He was at the cabin of his host's grey old father and mother for a long time. Grandpap Moreland proudly showed him a long-barreled Lancaster rifle whose stock was marked with many notches, which indicated many victories over many black bruins.

When supper was over John Moreland lighted the big glass lamp in the best room, and the family and their guest gathered there to spend the evening. Then the lanky moonshiner and his mother came in.

Granny Heck had the sharp features and the stooped,

thin figure of a witch. She wore a faded blue bandana about her white head, and she carried a long hickory staff; there was a reed-stemmed clay pipe in her mouth, and her dark calico skirt had a tobacco pocket in it.

Her son preceded her into the room. He walked to the centre table, faced about, and said with a low and airy sweep of his right hand:

"Bill, old boy, this here's maw. Maw, she tells forchunes."

"So this here," creaked Granny Heck, looking over the brass rims of her spectacles, "is Mr. Bill! Well, well! And la, la! I had a uncle named Bill, and he could jump a nine-rail fence. He done it on his fiftieth birthday, and won a gallon o' applejack and a 'coon-hide. It's shore a fine name. I jest thought to myself 'at I'd come up and see ye, Mr. Bill, and tell yore forchune."

She dropped into the rocker that Caleb had placed for her.

"Addie," she said to the smiling Mrs. Moreland, "will ye bring me a cup half full o' coffee grounds?"

When the cup came, the fortune-teller took it and shook it and patted it, all the while muttering mysterious words that she had learned from the old Indian, Cherokee Joe—which served her purpose very well. Then she moved a trifle nearer to the lamp, and began to look intently into the cup.

"I see," she mumbled more or less sepulchrally, "a pow'ful good-lookin' gyurl in a caliker dress, with her hair a-hangin' away down her back. A barefooted gyurl, with big, purty eyes. She's a-standin' on a low

a-peepin' at you through the laurels, Mr. Bill. is in the past. . . .

the future," she went on slowly, "I see this here ain as daylight through a knothole; a awful big with curly black hair and curly black beard, and eyes like a clifhawk's; and I see you too, Mr. and I see a fight, a master fight—Lord ha' mussy, a fight! But you'll marry the gyurl after all, Bill."

le laughed. The old woman had described Babe ford. But who was the "big, dark man"? Some who had lost his heart to the mountain girl, ps.

en the Hecks had gone, John Moreland leaned rd and touched his guest on the knee.

hat thar big man mentioned in tellin' yore for-," he said, "might ha' been Black Adam Ball. lerstand, I don't believe in forchune-tellin'. But ay Heck is a durned good guesser, and she hits it ' times. Black Adam he lives with his pap and or a few mile up the river. He's about thutty-five, e looks like a bear-beast with his curly beard and hair. As big as a skinned hoss, he is, and plumb lly strong. He's been a-beggin' Babe Littleford rry him fo' a year or two, and she won't listen 1.

ever ye do haf to fight Black Adam," John More- went on, "ye want to fight him with a two-eyed in and buckshot. He's the meanest man on earth; broth and pizen vine is religious aside o' him. ntel ye begin a-makin' love to Babe Littleford, I the' ain't no danger o' you a-havin' trouble with

Black Adam; and you ain't likely, I take it, to make love to Babe."

"But Babe's the best one o' the Littlefords," declared Luke.

John Moreland frowned at his son.

"The' ain't none of 'em fitten timber fo' archangels," he said, and reached for the leatherbound old family Bible. He opened the Book at random.

"It's about time we was a-goin' to our rest, and we'll go jest as soon as we've had prayers, Mr. Dale. This part o' yore visit, I'm shore, will seem like home to ye."

Dale made no reply.

When half a chapter from St. Matthew had been laboriously but reverently read, the Morelands knelt at their chairs, and so did Bill Dale. John Moreland's bedtime prayer was very simple, and very earnest, and it had in it more of thanksgiving than of supplication. And a part of it certainly was uncommon——

"Bless the stranger with us here to-night, and all o' our kinfolks, and all o' our friends, and our inimies, the Littlefords—'specially the Littlefords. Aymen!"

Dale was deeply impressed. He heard Mrs. Moreland dimly when she told him to let her know—she would hear him if he called—if there wasn't enough cover for his bed. Then he found himself alone with the stalwart chief of the Morelands.

He stepped forward and put his hand on the mountaineer's shoulder.

"How a man can go down on his knees and pray for his enemies," smiled Dale, "is entirely beyond me. Do you really mean it?"

"I try hard to," Moreland said quickly. "In a-doin' that," he went on, "I go Ben Littleford one better. Ben Littleford's the bell sheep o' the people who lives acrost the river from us, people we've hated fo' years and years. Ben, he holds fambly prayers, too, every night. He'd ax the blessin's o' the Lord on the stranger onder his roof, but not on his inimies, the Morelands. Yes, I try hard to mean it, Bill Dale. . . .

"It was allus hard fo' me to be a good man, Bill Dale. It's hard fo' any Moreland to be a good man. We're too full o' life and too human; we're too quick to hate and too quick—mebbe—to love. And we fight too quick; we're all sort o' proud, and with us honor is allus a-wrastlin' with goodness fo' the high place."

"And that other enemy," murmured Dale—and he wondered why that should bother him so much, why he should feel that vague responsibility about it—"the man who killed your brother, David——"

"I don't never pray fo' him," interrupted the mountaineer, going a little pale. "I hain't that nigh puffect. A man don't git so good 'at he axes the Almighty to bless the devil—or the rattler in the laurels, or the copperhead 'at waits onder a bush fo' the passin' o' some bare-legged child."

Dale winced, but Moreland didn't notice it. Dale let his hand fall from the other's shoulder. Moreland began to speak again:

"I didn't tell ye afore, Bill Dale. My brother David, he was the hope o' his people. He was better'n the rest of us. The one big aim o' his life was to educate us all, the benighted. Yes, we're benighted, and we know it. He meant to do it with the coal he'd found.

As I've done told ye, we ain't never had the heart to sell the coal. . . . I hope ye'll have a fine rest, Bill Dale, I ain't a-goin' to call ye 'Mister' no more, Bill Dale!"

"Don't!" smilingly said the younger man. "'Bill Dale' is right, y'know. Good night, John Moreland!"

Dale removed his shoes and outer clothing, blew out the light, and went to bed in the best room's hand-carved black walnut fourposter.

For a long time he lay there awake, and stared through a little window toward a bright star that burned like a beacon fire about the pine-fringed crest of David Moreland's Mountain. He did not hear the incessant gentle murmuring of Doe River the beautiful, or the mournful cries of the owls, or the shrill and weird screams of the nighthawks. Even these strange sounds could not break into his thoughts.

He believed he understood now why his father had turned a greenish grey when this coal property was mentioned to him. He believed he understood why his father had flatly refused to investigate this vein. But he was wholly at a loss to account for the use of his own given name instead of Dale.

Then his mind turned upon the mountainfolk. They really seemed a great deal better than the set that had been his since he could remember. He had hated the artificialities of his old life so much that he put almost more than full value on the honest, simple virtues of these people of the hills.

Looking toward the mountain again, he spoke as though he were talking to David Moreland himself:

"I'll see it through for you, old man. This shall be my country."

CHAPTER III

GOLIATH OF THE HILLS

DALE awoke a little after daybreak, arose and dressed himself, and went out by way of the door beside the huge stone-and-clay chimney. A thin stream of blue smoke was curling upward from the kitchen fire; the Morelands also were up.

The mountain air was bracing. Dale threw out his chest and started eagerly for a walk.

The road led past the cabin of Grandpap Moreland, the old man of the very long rifle and the black bruin stories. When Dale was directly in front of the log house, he saw the aged mountaineer standing on a rickety sawhorse beside the stone step at the narrow porch; Grandpap Moreland was helping a grey cat down from the roof.

"It's a blasted funny thing," he was saying complainingly, "'at you can climb onto the house, but you cain't climb down!"

He sprang stiffly from the sawhorse, dropped the cat, saw Dale smiling at him and called out cheerily:

"Mornin'!" I was jest a-takin' that thar cussfired old pest down offen the roof. I've took him down every mornin' as reg'lar as I make fires, fo' three year or more. Ef it wasn't bad luck to kill a cat, I' shoot him, mebbe."

After breakfasting with John Moreland, Bill Dale borrowed fishing-tackle and a minnow-pail from his host, and set out alone for the little river. He observed the wild things as he went. In the dust of the oxwagon road he saw the crooked track of the black-racer snake, the terror of the rattler. Brown wrens hopped, twittering, along the old rail fences. Above the foot of the majestic Big Pine a dozen crows were harrying a hawk. Wild bees were humming around the purple heads of the ironweed and the scarlet bloom of the meadow clover. There was the mating call of a partridge, and the lovelorn coo of a dove. . . .

Where the brook from John Moreland's spring emptied into the river, he stopped and caught a dozen black-back minnows, then he started down the bigger stream to look for a promising pool.

There were many shoals and rapids, and he went almost half a mile before he found a place to his liking. It was a beautiful spot. Above, the water poured between two great boulders with a gentle roar; below, it shallowed out over round stones. Overhead towered tall white sycamores.

Not until he had put a minnow on the hook and cast it out did he see that he was not alone at the pool. On the other side, less than sixty feet away, Babe Littleford sat on a stone the size of a small barrel; she held a cane fishing-rod in her hands, and her bare feet were in the water to her ankles. She was looking squarely toward Dale, and there was something akin to reproachful anger in her long brown eyes.

"Good morning!" called Dale, lifting his hat.

There was no reply. There was not even a change

of countenance. Again Dale called his friendly greeting, and again there was no reply. It piqued Dale. He wanted to know more about that wild but somehow superb, freshly beautiful creature who had interested him so much the day before.

A few yards down the stream the white body of a sycamore lay from one bank to the other; it had been blown there by a recent storm. Dale wound his line, took up his minnowpail, went down and crossed by means of the prostrate tree.

She didn't even look around when he walked up to her and spoke again. It struck him as being decidedly odd.

"I say," he told her, "you're as chatty as a set of stencils. You mustn't talk so much, y'know."

Her eyes smiled at the river, but Dale couldn't see her eyes.

"Do you like violets, Miss Littleford?" he asked next.

In the black, mica-starred soil at his feet grew a carpet of the finest violets he had ever seen. Babe let the tip of her cane rod fall into the water and looked around.

"It sounds funny to hear a man talk o' sech little things as vi'lets," she declared. "Most o' men don't think o' nothin' but workin', huntin', fightin' and eatin'. Out here we mostly calls vi'lets 'johnny-jump-ups.' I'm a little mad at you! I went home yeste'day—and I think I run might' nigh the whole six mile—and fixed up dinner fo' you, 'cause I onderstood you was a-comin' to our house—and you went to them low-down Morelands!"

"I beg pardon," he said contritely; "didn't know you were especially expecting me. I had business," he added, "with John Moreland."

He looked toward his toes. There was a flutter and a swish, and a fine bass came flouncing to the violets.

"My!" he exclaimed. "It's a dandy, isn't it?"

He unwound his line, put on a fresh lure and flung out.

"What are you baiting with, Miss Littleford—minnows?"

"No," smiling saucily, "I ain't a-baitin' with min-ohs. I'm a-baitin' with *minners*. You're wuss'n Major Bradley, who spends his summers up here. He calls taters 'potaytohs'!"

Before Bill Dale could make a reply there came to his ears from somewhere down the river the chorus of a rakish old hill song, and the voice was that of the lanky moonshiner, By Heck—

"Oh, when I die, don't-a bury me deep,
Put no tombstone at my head and feet,
Put a bear's jawbone in my right hand
On my way to the Prom-ised La-a-and,
Oh! On my way to the Promised Land!"

Dale laughed. Babe thrust her catch on a forked switch, baited her hook and threw out again.

A few minutes later there appeared on the Moreland side of the river the singer of the rakish old song; he had a minnowpail in one hand and a white hickory rod in the other.

"Hi, thar, Bill, old boy!" he yelled. "Hi, thar, Babe! Either of ye'uns ketched anything?"

Ben Littleford's daughter held up her fish proudly. Heck slapped his thigh with his slouch hat.

"Good fo' you!" he exclaimed. "But they ain't a-bitin' jest right. The moon's wrong, and the signs is wrong, fo' fishin'."

At that instant John Moreland appeared at Heck's side. He seemed very serious about something.

"Bill Dale," he called, "come over here."

Wondering, Dale put down his rod and turned to obey. Two minutes later he stood before John Moreland.

"I jest wanted to tell ye," and the mountaineer almost closed one alert grey eye, "'at ye're purty shore to git into trouble over thar."

"I'm an able-bodied man," Dale returned smilingly.

"You shore are," frowned Moreland, "but mebbe you ain't used to durned hard fightin'."

Not used to hard fighting! Dale's smile broadened. Once he had whipped a heavyweight pugilist; and he had fought as a matter of principle, and not for money or prestige.

Moreland suddenly jerked one thumb toward the other side of the stream. Dale looked and saw, standing beside Babe Littleford, a quite formidable man. He had the height and breadth, almost, of a Goliath. He was black-eyed and black-haired, and his thick, short beard was curled like the hair between a bull's horns. In one hand he carried a repeating rifle as lightly as though it were a mere straw. He was roughly dressed; his arms were bare to the elbows, and they showed muscles like knots of wire cable painted brown.

One of his great arms suddenly straightened toward

Dale, and a voice as gruff as the growl of a bear said hotly:

"What was you a-doin' here a-talkin' to my gyurl?"

Babe Littleford looked angry. Dale flushed, then went pale.

"I have a habit of talking with whom I please," he said evenly.

"Spoke like a man," drawled the lanky Heck in a very low tone.

Goliath of the hills stared unbelievably. Dale said in an undertone to John Moreland:

"Is it that Ball fellow?"

"Yes," answered the hillman; "it's Black Adam Ball. I seed him a-comin', and I wanted to git ye on this side o' the river. You ain't got no two-eyed shotgun loaded with buckshot, y'know."

Ball dropped his rifle to the violets, slowly clenched his huge and hairy hands, and thrust his bearded jaw out aggressively.

"I dare ye over here, ye pink coward!" he challenged.

"If you have any business with me, come over here and transact it," Dale retorted. "I won't run."

"That's Moreland terrytory," Ball objected. "But I'll meet ye half way, and I dare ye to take me up, ye lace-trimmed pink mollycoddle!"

Bill Dale groaned at the epithet. He glanced toward John Moreland, then he looked toward the middle of the river.

Half way would be the middle of the river, and no place for a fight, surely. But Dale was nettled. His temper, the temper that he had never been able to keep wholly under control, was rising fast. He threw off his

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coat and hat and rolled the sleeves of his soft shirt to his elbows. Then he waded into the pool. The slowly moving water was up to his waist at the half-way point, and the bottom was of hard-packed sand.

The Goliath stared unbelievably. He was not accustomed to having his challenges thus accepted. He threw off his hat and went to meet the lithe young stranger.

Bill Dale squared himself and put up his guard. Adam Ball came on, and he was scowling wickedly. It was to be a hundred and eighty pounds of gymnasium strength against more than two hundred pounds of the strength of the out-of-doors; it was to be the intelligent fighter against the primitive animal-man, fists that were somewhat tender against fists that were hard and toughened—a battle without a rule or a rest.

Ball rushed, the clear water swirling in his wake, and let out with a powerful right. It was a blow to crush an ordinary man's chest in; but, to Ball's surprise, it failed to land. Dale evaded it cleverly, and at the same time sent a swift left uppercut to the other's bull-like jaw. Adam Ball muttered two wicked words and steadied himself; he had caught a tartar. A moment, and he led out again, and he missed again; but he followed it with a blow that made a red mark on Bill Dale's shoulder.

"How's that, ye pink coward?" he crowed.

"All right—how's this?"

And Dale sent on a mighty blow that rebounded dully from the giant's chest and elicited only a harsh laugh of contempt. There was little to be gained by

striking a man like Adam Ball on the chest; Dale knew now that he must reach a more vulnerable spot.

Then he feinted with his left and drove his right to Ball's mouth, bringing blood. Ball roared in his blind rage and dashed toward his antagonist, resolved to get a clinch. But Dale eluded the terrible arms, although in so doing he received a blow on the temple that made him dizzy for a few seconds.

While Ball was again engaged in trying to gain the advantage of a clinch, Granny Heck made her appearance on the Moreland bank. She promptly launched her sympathies in a manner that pleased both her gaping son and the watchful and silent John Moreland.

"Hit him in the stummick, Mr. Bill!" she cried over and over. "Hit him whar he lives at!"

The combat grew hotter and hotter. Both landed frequently now. The faces of both were bleeding, and each spat red now and then. Their clothing had been torn away to the belt, and their magnificent wet bodies glowed in the morning sunlight. Dale had seriously damaged his soft hands; they felt as though they were filled with slivers of steel. But still he fought on doggedly, determinedly, desperately, minute after minute.

Those on the two banks watched it all with suppressed excitement. Even garrulous Granny Heck was silent now. Babe Littleford stood in the edge of the water, with her hands clasped below her throat; her face was pale. John Moreland, who had witnessed many other great fights, himself a fighting man, had never before beheld such a contest of strength and endurance

as this; Bill Dale had won John Moreland's heart for all time to come.

But the blows of the fighters were growing weaker now. The sound of their laboured breathing rose distinctly over the gentle roar of the sparkling waters above. Occasionally Ball muttered an oath as he tried for a clinch and failed to get it. Dale was still elusive.

Then the watchers saw Adam Ball lunge at his man, saw Dale stumble out of sheer weakness, saw Ball's mighty blood-streaked arms close about the beautiful white body and hug it close to his great and hairy chest. A moment, and Ball was bending Dale slowly backward and downward more by reason of weight than of strength; another moment, and Ball was about to sink the brown head under the surface!

Babe Littleford gave a smothered cry. John Moreland stepped toward the water and shouted hoarsely:

"Don't ye drown him, Adam! Ef ye do, ye'll answer to me!"

But Ball did not hear him. Ball was hard put in his attempt to thrust his antagonist's head under water.

Dale had gathered himself for a last move. He slipped downward suddenly, immersing himself completely, and shot one arm around Ball's thigh; then, by a great effort, he rose with the giant and overthrew him, and staggered free!

Ball's hairy face came to the surface first. Dale fought back the pain of the water in his lungs, and the pain as of sharp and jagged slivers of steel in his hands, and struck madly, half blindly, at the hateful face. He kept it down, but it wouldn't go under the water completely. . . .

Adam Ball began to drift as though lifeless down the stream. Bill Dale followed, still fighting weakly, choking as he breathed. But soon he ceased to strike. He saw, instead of the beastlike face, flashes as of distant summer lightning, and red blotches against a thick blackness. The blotches faded, and all became dark to him; he pitched forward, gasping, and began to drift down the stream with the vanquished Ball.

Babe Littleford was standing in the water to her knees. When Dale succumbed to utter exhaustion, she started toward him, to save him from drowning. She felt strangely drawn toward the big, white, clean man who had whipped the Goliath she had always dreaded. But she had gone only a few yards toward the centre of the river when John Moreland and Sam Heck reached the unconscious figures.

Heck dragged Ball to the Littleford bank and left him lying there, face downward, on the sand. Moreland half carried, half dragged Bill Dale to the other bank. Babe Littleford waded out. She paid absolutely no attention to the worsted bully. She stood intently watching the limp form of Dale.

"Is he dead, John Moreland?" she called tremulously.

"No, Babe," Moreland answered, his voice not unkind; "he ain't anyways nigh dead."

He and Sam Heck took up Dale's dripping figure and bore it away. Babe Littleford ran to higher ground, hid herself behind a clump of sassafras and watched them.

Granny Heck followed with Dale's coat and hat. She chattered all the way across the meadow——

"Now what did I tell ye, John and Sam? What did I tell ye? La, la! Wasn't it a master fight, like I said—now wasn't it?"

"Sometimes ye make me a little tired, granny-woman," Moreland remonstrated gently. "The' ain't nothin' in forchune-tellin'. You've jest been here fo' so long 'at you know how to jedge the future by the past. Havin' seed so much o' human nature, you know a right smart about it. And you're a tol'able good guesser, too, I reckon."

Granny Heck flared up quickly: "Ain't nothin' in forchune-tellin'! Now don't go and fool yeself, John Moreland. You listen to me about a half a minute, John. I seed more in the cup 'an I told Mr. Bill. I seed blood and death. I seed a big fight atwixt the Morelands and the Littlefords!"

"That's easy to guess at," John Moreland replied. "You know, o' course, 'at Black Adam will do all he can to bring trouble to us on account o' Bill Dale a-stayin' with us. And you know it ain't never on-possible to hatch up war atween us and the Littlefords. Jest run on ahead, Granny Heck, and tell my wife to hunt up some kind o' good liniment fo' Bill's bruises. Tell her she needn't to waste time a-lookin' up any bandages. This man here is like me: he wouldn't wear bandages, 'cause they look bad."

CHAPTER IV

DALE TELLS A STORY

WHEN Dale came back to a state of consciousness, he was lying under cover in the carved black walnut bed. Beside him stood John Moreland, who held in one hand a bowl containing a hot herb brew that his wife had prepared. Granny Heck, her son By, and Mrs. Moreland stood not far away.

"This here'll be good fo' ye, I think," said Moreland, nodding toward the bowl in his hand. He went over and put an arm around Dale's shoulders and helped him to sit up.

Dale drank the stuff with difficulty.

"Much obliged," he muttered thickly. "I—let's see, did I whip—how did it end? He didn't lick me, did he—that fellow Ball?"

"He shore didn't," smiled Moreland. "Not by a big sight. He fell out fust. His own pap won't hardly know him, Bill!"

"You take a man named Bill," creaked Granny Heck, "and he'll sartinly scrap ye. Now thar was my Uncle Bill, him what jumped a nine-rail fence on his fiftieth birthday——"

News travels rapidly in the big hills. The Morelands began to gather at the home of their chief to see the

man who had whipped Black Adam Ball; every Moreland able to walk came to see Bill Dale. For three hours he was lionized, but he didn't enjoy it; the water had left many pains in his chest, and his head ached dully, and his hands still felt as though the bones were shattered in them.

Came a thundershower that afternoon, and the mountain evening fell with a chill. A fire was made in the wide stone fireplace in the guest's room, and when supper was over the family gathered there with Dale, who refused to be kept in bed. The light of the blazing logs was sufficient, and the big glass lamp was not brought into use.

After a few minutes of silently watching grotesque shadows flit across the log walls, Dale said to John Moreland:

"If your brother David could know, don't you think he'd want you to get the value out of the coal?"

John Moreland bent forward to rest his chin in his hands. His sober grey eyes stared thoughtfully toward the fire.

"I ain't never looked at it thataway," he said.

"That's the right way to look at it," declared Dale. "But you shouldn't sell the property as it is."

The mountaineer turned an inquiring face toward his guest.

"How in thunder could I handle it ef I didn't?"

"Why not let me develop it for you?" Dale said earnestly, eagerly. "I won't charge you anything above expenses, and I won't be extravagant."

"It'd take consid'able money to start things a-movin'. Have you got it?" asked Moreland.

"No, but I can get it. Almost anybody would be willing to lend money on so good a thing as this, y'know."

For a little while Moreland sat there and looked squarely at Dale, who returned his gaze without a sign of flinching. The hillman was trying to find a motive; he was not of the class that expects something for nothing.

"How comes it 'at you, who ain't knowed us but two days," he demanded, "can be so much int'rested in us?"

The question demanded a straightforward answer. Dale realized that there was but one way in which he could give a satisfactory explanation, and that that was by telling the truth—but not the whole truth, as he surmized it, for then his efforts would go for naught.

Moreland was speaking again, and his eyes were brighter now.

"I agree 'at David would want us to develop the coal, ef he could know. It's like a light a-breakin' to me. But that coal is sacred to us, Bill Dale, and afore ye go any fu'ther I'll haf to ax ye to tell me all about yeself. A city man up here in the wilderness—it don't look s'picious, Bill, mebbe, but—well, I hopes ye can pardon me fo' axin' it. I shore got to be keerful about Brother David's coal. Addie and the boys'll go out and leave jest us two in here; and when ye're a-talkin' to me it's the same as talkin' to a tombstone so fer as tellin' is consarned. Addie, honey; Luke, you and Cale——"

Mrs. Moreland and her sons arose and left the room, closing the door behind them. Bill Dale paced the

floor, arms folded, brows drawn. Finally he halted before the Moreland chief.

"There's nothing I'm ashamed of, I guess," he said. "I don't like to tell it simply because I don't like to tell it. But—I'll do it."

He sat down in his sheepskin-lined rocker, lay back and closed his eyes as though to visualize the story, to live it over.

"Maybe it's not very much in my favor, John Moreland," he began. "I never could get along with my parents, or with the set I was born into. Somehow, I was different. I liked the out-of-doors. I didn't like dances and parties and such things. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and perhaps I was spoiled. Father and mother wanted me to be a dandy; they even wanted me to let a servant dress me. The climax came when they tried to marry me to a young woman who didn't want me any more than I wanted her."

He opened his eyes, looked straight at Moreland, and went on:

"You see, they wanted to marry us in order to unite old Clavering's fortune and my dad's; Patricia, too, was an only child. It had been all cut and dried for us, for years. You may think it was weakness on our part to agree against our wills to do it, but it wasn't—not wholly, anyway. They put it up to me like this: they said I owed it to them, that it was my duty; that I had always been a severe trial to them; that my savagery had put grey into my mother's hair, and a lot of things of that kind. I fell for it at last; it was sort of a matter of self-defence. With Patricia, it was

a case of—well, a case of simple obedience. Pat is a good girl. . . . ”

A minute of silence; then:

“I’ll hurry along with it, John Moreland. I had one fine friend back there. It was Robert McLaurin, a reporter on the city’s leading newspaper. My parents didn’t take to him because he was a worker, and not a fop. Mother wanted Pat’s cousin, ‘poor dear Harry’ Clavering, for my best man. ‘Poor dear Harry’ and I had had a fight, once upon a time, and I—I had whipped him; and I didn’t like him. I chose Bobby McLaurin for my best man, and I wouldn’t give him up.

“It was only when we met before the chancel in a big crowded church that I fully realized the tragedy of it for Pat. I saw that her face was a clean white, and that her eyes held the shadow of something that was very terrible. I turned my head and saw the same shadow in the eyes of my greatest friend, Bobby McLaurin. I knew then. Bobby and Patricia loved each other, John Moreland! Bobby didn’t have any money to speak of, and that had held them apart.

“It had been the finest thing in the world, McLaurin’s acting as best man for me. There was friendship for you. I couldn’t take from them their one chance of happiness. . . .

“I couldn’t see anything else to do, so I ran. I went home, pulled off my wedding rig and put on the clothes I’m wearing now, threw some things into a bag and hurried down to the union station. I found that I could have my choice between a flier for Atlanta and the—the train that brought me here. I bought passage

to Atlanta, but I never meant to use it; I meant to take the other train and pay a cash fare. In doing that, I hoped to lose myself from them. I wanted to go unhindered to some country where I wouldn't be considered a—a savage, y'know.

"I went out to the train-shed, and I hadn't been there a minute when Bobby McLaurin came. I asked him how he knew where to find me. He said:

"'I thought you wouldn't care to stay here after doing what you did, and I wanted to say good-bye, Bill.' He always called me that, and it made me feel like a man. Then I put my bag down and took him by both shoulders and told him this:

"'Look here, Bobby, I'm going to give you some advice, and you take it. You steal Pat and marry her. Steal Pat and marry her if you have to live in a hole in a hillside. You're as good as any of them, and lots better than most of them. You can work your way to a better job and better salary. You see,' I told him, 'we get about what we deserve in this world. Most of us don't deserve much.'

"I asked him if mother was badly cut up. He said she was; that she had fainted. Dad swore aloud, he said, there in church. I told Bobby good-bye and got aboard the train without saying anything about where I was going—but I didn't know myself where I was going, at the time.

"Now you've heard it. Every word was truth. If you'll trust me with the coal, I'll make this land my land, your people my people. I'll suffer with you when you suffer, and be happy with you when you're happy; and when you fight, I'll fight with you."

The Moreland chief arose, and Bill Dale arose. The hillman put out his hand, and Dale gripped it.

"I believe in ye, Bill," said John Moreland. "Fo' another thing, I've seed ye fight. You can work the coal."

He looked toward the closed inner door and called, "Oh, Addie; you and the boys can come back now."

Out of the night a face appeared at one of the small windows. It was a feminine face, and handsome rather than pretty. Two slender, sunburned hands gripped the window-ledge nervously. The face pressed closer to the glass, then disappeared. Soon afterward the outer door of the guest's room opened, and Ben Littleford's daughter entered. Her skirts were dripping wet.

Mrs. Moreland arose and went toward the young woman. She knew that only something of great importance could bring a Littleford into her home in this fashion.

"What's the matter, Babe?"

Babe Littleford gave no attention to Mrs. Moreland. She went on to Bill Dale, walking softly on bare feet. She looked down, coloured a little, looked up and spoke:

"Black Adam is a-goin' to kill you to-night, Bill Dale."

"That so?" Dale's smile was rather grim. "How did you find that out, Miss Littleford?"

"I found it out, all right. As he went off from the river this mornin', I made fun of him; and he patted the stock of his rifle and said he'd git you through a

window! He was at our house this evenin' to help fix pap's gun, and when he left he started this way, a-goin' by the blowed-down sycamore. I waded the river at Blue Cat Shoals to beat him here. I thought you might want to know about it, so's ye could mebbe save other folks the trouble o' makin' a funeral fo' ye."

She backed toward the door, her eyes never leaving Dale's face. Another second, and she was gone.

They were all on their feet now. John Moreland gripped Dale's arm.

"Over thar aside o' the chimbley, Bill!" he ordered, his native drawl for the moment absent. "Out, Addie, honey! Luke, bring my rifle and hat—jump keen! Cale, bring water and drownd this here fire!"

It was done. Moreland took his hat and the repeater and went alone into the night.

When some fifteen minutes had passed, there came to Dale's ears the sound of shooting. There were ten shots in such rapid succession that they made almost a continuous roar. Then came echoes and reverberations, and then silence. Soon John Moreland let himself into the dark room.

His wife's voice was low and filled with anxiety:

"What happened, John?"

A dull thud came through the darkness as her husband's rifle-butt struck the floor.

"This is what happened, Addie:

"As I passed the cawner o' the house, I got down that thar old oxwhip to take along. I went acrost the road and into the meadow, and thar I seen Adam Ball a-comin'. I hid, and when Adam was about to pass me, I jumped up and jerked his rifle from him and busted

it ag'in a rock. Then I lights in and thrashes him with the oxwhip ontel he broke and run. And 'en this here happened, Addie:

"I was a-watchin' to see ef Adam had reely went off, when I seed a man a-comin' towards me fast. I thought it was Ball, o' course. So I up and tells him to show me how fast he can run and commences a-shootin' over his head to skeer him. But it didn't happen to be Adam Ball—it was Ben Littleford! He was a-follerin' Babe to see what she was up to, o' course."

"How do ye know it was Ben, pap?" Caleb asked.

"How do I know?" growled John Moreland. "When I got through a-shootin', he hollers at me and says: 'To-morrow, John Moreland,' he says, 'we'll have a little Gettysburg o' our own!' And I might mind ye, Cale, 'at he keeps his word the same as I do."

"And Littleford meant a——" began Dale.

"That the'll be a big fight to-morrow," said Moreland. "Bill Dale, in a-makin' this land yore land and these people yore people, I'm a-feard ye're a-goin' to git more'n ye expected, mebbe more'n ye can handle. Do ye want to back out of it and let the coal go, or are ye one o' these fellers who chaws what they bites off ef it's a hoss's head?"

"I'll stick." Dale's voice came firmly in the darkness. "I'll stick."

CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERY OF THE RIFLES

AN hour after John Moreland had sent his ten rifle bullets whining over the head of Ben Littleford, every Moreland and every Littleford in the valley knew of the declaration of war. And each man of them oiled his weapons and put them in better working order.

When Dale went to bed, there was too much on his mind to render sleeping easy for him. To-morrow he would have to help in the fight against the Littlefords, kinsmen of the young woman who had saved him, without doubt, from death by the murderous rifle of the mountaineer Goliath—or break his word flatly. It was a poor return for such a favour! The longer he thought over the dilemma, the more perplexed he became.

He thought, too, of the everlasting wonder, the tail of John Moreland's bedtime prayer. How a man could go down on his knees and ask the blessings of the Almighty upon men whom he meant to fight the next day was a thing that Bill Dale could not understand.

It was after midnight before he slept. He woke at the break of day, arose and dressed himself, and went out. Going toward the flower-filled front yard, he found himself facing a very angry John Moreland.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Matter enough," clipped the mountaineer. "Bill Dale, I'm a-goin' to ax you a question, and I want the truth. Will I git it?"

"You'll get the truth if you get anything. Shoot the question."

"All right. What do you know about my gun?"

"About as much as you know of the left hind wheel of Ben Hur's chariot. What's wrong with it?"

Moreland's eyes were steady and cold. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his corduroy trousers. Then his face softened a trifle.

"I reckon I ought to ax yore pardon," he said in a low voice. "Ye see, my gun's plumb gone!"

"You had it only last night," Dale said. "Did it disappear——"

"Whilst I slept," cut in the hillman. "Both o' my guns is gone. And Luke's repeater is gone, and so is Cale's, and we hain't got nothin' at all to fight them damned Littleford's with!"

"Gone!" Dale exclaimed wonderingly and—it seemed to him—asininely.

"It must ha' been the Littlefords, I guess," frowned Moreland. "Fo' because who else would ha' done it? But to save the life o' me I cain't see how they got in and took my rifle without wakin' me up, Bill Dale. I slept twicet as light as a sick mouse."

Within ten more minutes, every man of the Morelands was gathered there at the house of their chief—and every man of them had lost their weapons during the night!

John Moreland called Dale aside and said to him:

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"You're high on the good side o' them thar triflin' Hecks, and, so fer as they know, you ain't int'rested in the feud. I wisht you'd go down thar and see By and his mother, and see ef ye can find out whar our rifles went."

When Dale had gone off down the dusty oxwagon road, Caleb Moreland climbed a tall ash that grew behind his father's cabin and kept a watch toward the Littleford side of the river. He saw a group of men standing in Ben Littleford's cabin yard, and nothing else.

A little more than a quarter of an hour after Dale left John Moreland, he entered by the gateless gateway at the cabin of the Hecks. It was a dilapidated place, and it stood not far from the river. By sat in the front doorway; he was lazily cutting a new mid-day sunmark in the place of the worn old one. Behind him sat his mother, who was busily knitting a grey yarn stocking.

The moonshiner looked up and started quickly to his feet.

"Hi, thar, Bill, old boy!" he greeted cordially. "My gosh, but ye've come at the right time, shore. We're a-goin' to have young squirrels fo' dinner, and a b'iled hamshank with string beans, and cawnbread made with the yaller o' hen aigs. Live whilst ye do live, says I. Come right in, Bill, old boy."

"La, la, la!" cried Granny Heck, looking over the brass rims of her spectacles. "How glad I am to see ye, Mr. Bill! Come right in and tell us the news."

Bill Dale crossed the threshold and accepted a creaking chair. His eyes took in at a sweeping glance the

home-made dining-table with its cover of red oilcloth, the broken cast-iron stove, the strings of dried peppers hanging on the log walls, the broken stillworm lying in a corner.

"The Littlefords," said Dale, "have declared war."

"Sakes!" laughed the old woman. "We knowed that last night when we heered them ten shots."

"And all the Moreland rifles are missing." Dale watched the effect of his words.

"What!" the Hecks cried in one voice.

Their surprise seemed genuine. Dale pressed the subject further and learned only that if they knew anything concerning the disappearance of the rifles they were not going to tell. Then he promised to have dinner with them at some other time, and started homeward by way of the pool above the blown-down sycamore.

There was a chance that Ben Littleford's daughter would be there fishing, Dale told himself, and it was barely possible that she could throw some light on the mystery of the rifles.

He crossed the river by means of the prostrate tree. Babe was there; she sat on the stone on which she had been sitting the morning before; her back was to him, and her bare feet were in the water to her ankles. Dale went up close, stopped and gathered a handful of violets and dropped them over her shoulder and into her lap.

Babe looked around and smiled.

"What luck, Miss Littleford?"

"Nothin'. I don't much want to ketch anything," she said slowly, a spirit of sadness in her musical voice.

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"I—I jest come off down here to be whar it's quiet. You ought to hear the noise 'at pap and the rest of 'em is a-makin'!"

Dale narrowed his eyes. "Are they—er, making a noise? And what about?"

"My goodness gracious alive! You'd think so, ef ye could hear 'em! Y'ought to hear pap cuss John Moreland!" She shrugged her pretty shoulders, lifted the small end of her rod to its proper place, and went on, "I never did see pap half as mad as he was when he got home last night from a-follerin' me."

"Mad at you?" asked Dale.

"No; but he would ha' been ef he hadn't ha' had all his madness turned ag'in them Morelands. You knowed about pap's trouble on yan side o' the river last night?"

"Yes, I knew about that," Dale answered slowly. "But John Moreland thought your father was my antagonist of yesterday."

"An—antagonist?" Babe muttered inquiringly. "What's that?"

"I mean Adam Ball, y'know."

"Oh. That's what I told pap. But pap he wouldn't believe it, and he won't never believe it—'cause he don't want to believe it. I told him 'at John Moreland wasn't a-shootin' to hit, and he wouldn't believe that, neither. Pap's as hard-headed as a brindle cow, when he gits a fool notion on him. What—what did them Morelands say about their guns a-bein' gone?"

Dale straightened.

"How did you find that out?"

"Don't matter how!" She smiled almost saucily.

"I knowed about it afore you did, Mr. Bill Dale. Don't you think whoever done it done a kind thing?"

"To disarm the Morelands, so that when the enemy comes they will have nothing with which to defend themselves?" Dale didn't know much about these hill feuds. "No, Miss Littleford, I can't say that I think it was a kind thing to do."

Miss Littleford arose and faced Dale. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Has the inemy come?" she demanded icily.

"No, but——"

"All right," the young woman broke in sharply. "If the inemy hain't come, what're *you* a-kickin' about?"

Her brown eyes were full of fire. They defied, and they withered, and Bill Dale suddenly felt that he was smaller and of less account in the scheme of things than that uneducated, wildly superb creature that stood there before him.

"Well, say it!" clipped Babe.

"I beg your pardon," Dale said evenly. "I didn't mean to offend, y'know."

His quick contrition struck the girl. Her mouth quivered. She dropped her fishing-rod, and began to toy absently with the end of her long, thick plait of brown hair.

"I've seed so much o' this fightin'," she murmured tremulously, "that it makes me go to pieces. I ought to beg yore pardon, mebbe, and I d-d-do. . . . I've seed a good many fine, strong men brought home dead or a-dyin' from the Moreland bullets. And the Littlefords has killed Morelands, too. One side about as

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as t'other, I reckon. I'd be glad to give my life
o' it!"

help you, if I can," Dale told her. "Perhaps
n make friends of the Morelands and your
"

u don't know what a hard thing it'd be," she
tearfully. "The two sets has hated each other
nce I can rickollect. And you won't be here very
reckon."

ay be here for the rest of my life," said Dale.
it the coal?" inquired Babe.

rtly—yes, it's the coal. I'm going to develop it
e Morelands."

e looked at him with a tiny herald of hope in
es. Before she could speak again, there came
omewhere back in the meadow the sound of her
s voice——

be! O-oh, Babe!"

min'!" cried the girl, half turning. "We'll try
ke 'em friends; we'll try. Old Major Bradley,
e up here afore long to spend the summer, and
elp us. He's a mighty good man; you're shore
him. He gen'ally stays with us when he's here.
o easy with John Moreland! But when ye git
e'll have 'em all. I'll work on pap. The' ain't
iger o' trouble right now, anyways. Good-bye,
ale!"

e moment, Miss Littleford," and he took a step
her. "Are you sure there's no danger right

e halted, faced about nervously, and smiled a

"Don't call me 'Miss' no more," said she. "It makes me feel old. Call me what everybody else calls me, ef ye don't mind. Why, every one o' the Littlefords lost their rifles last night the same as the Morelands did! Meet me here at sundown, and I'll tell ye about it. Good-bye, Bill Dale!"

"Good-bye, Babe," he smiled.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE RIVER AGAIN

JOHN MORELAND met Dale at the gate.

"What did ye find out?"

"I learned," was the answer, "that the Littlefords all lost their guns just as the Morelands did."

"The devil!"

The mountaineers began to crowd about Dale.

"And who," asked their leader, "do ye think done it?"

Bill Dale shook his head slowly and threw out his hands.

"How should I know?" He went on: "Babe told me about the Littleford guns disappearing. I saw her down at the river; she was fishing."

"Did she say anything," pursued John Moreland, "'at sounded like she knowed whar them guns went to?"

"She told me," said Dale, "that she would give her life to stop the fighting. She seemed rather badly worked up over it."

From the cabin's front doorway came a woman's sorrowful voice:

"And me, too; I'd give my life to stop this here fightin'. I had a boy, a big, strappin' boy——"

John Moreland frowned toward his wife and interrupted, "Now, Addie, honey, don't do that."

It ended the talk.

Mrs. Moreland dried her eyes on a corner of her freshly-ironed gingham apron, and announced the noonday meal. The mountaineers dispersed. Grandpap Moreland went away clawing at his long white beard and grumbling over the loss of his beloved old Lancaster.

An hour later, Dale cornered the Moreland leader on the vine-hung front porch and suggested that they look over the coal property that afternoon. He was eager to go to work, eager to be doing something worth while, he told Moreland. The hillman stood very still for what seemed to the other a very long time, and had no word to say. Evidently the feud had all his mind now.

When he did speak, he said simply: "All right, Bill."

After half an hour of fighting their way through thickets of blooming laurel and ivy, they drew up before an old and mildewed cabin at the north end of David Moreland's Mountain. Moreland led the way in and pointed to a spot under a small, paneless window.

"Thar," said he, "is whar we found my brother David."

A little brown owl flew uncertainly out through the tumbled-down chimney. A colony of mudwasps droned under the rotting rafters. The two men turned for the point at which the coal vein ran out to the light of day.

Dale picked up a piece of the shining black stuff. Judging by the little he knew and the great amount of description he had heard, the vein was very large and the coal itself of the finest grade.

"It was a big find," he told his companion, "a big

ind. It was a pity to let it lie here untouched for so long; and yet, it's worth more to-day than it was ever worth before."

His enthusiasm ran warm, and Moreland caught it quickly. Together they hastily planned out the little railroad that was to wind its way through the wilds and connect with the big railroad at the Halfway Switch.

"I know I'm a-doin' right about it," the mountaineer said twice for the benefit of his conscience. "I know more David he would want me to do this ef he could now."

"I'm sure of it," agreed Dale. "I'll start for Cincinnati to-morrow. I've got enough money to take me here and back. I have a very wealthy friend there—his name is Harris; I think I can borrow enough from him to finance the beginning of this thing. And I'll buy a locomotive and cars, and all the other necessary machinery, while I'm in Cincinnati—unless I fail to get the money from Harris. When I get back, which should be within eight days, we'll start the work. At my guess, I'd say we'll need twenty men. Can we get them?"

"Shore," nodded the mountaineer. "And all Morelands at that."

They turned homeward. At last, Bill Dale was happy. He had something to do now—an aim in life. He had difficulties to overcome, obstacles to remove, barriers to surmount—it was his big chance!

It was almost sundown when Dale returned from his visit to the coal vein—Big Pine Mountain hid the sun

at a little after three in the afternoon. He borrowed a fishing-rod and a minnow-pail, which made his going to the river seem proper enough to John Moreland, and set out to meet Babe Littleford. He was glad that nobody expressed a desire to accompany him.

He found Ben Littleford's daughter where he had found her twice before—sitting on a stone the size of a small barrel. She was fishing with an unbaited hook, which was equal to fishing not at all, and she seemed pleased when she saw him coming. He sat down on the stone at her side. She moved over a little shyly, and tried to cover her feet with her calico skirts.

"Needn't bother to hide them," laughed Bill Dale. "They're pretty enough. Most feet, y'know, are necessary evils, like chimneys and rainspouts!"

Babe Littleford blushed. He went on, to hide her confusion, "Tell me about the rifles."

"You must shore keep it a secret," she told him.

"I promise."

"Better put yore hook in, so's ef anybody comes along——"

Dale threw out an empty hook.

"I want to tell ye some other things fust, so's ye'll onderstand better when I come to the part about the rifles," Babe began, looking thoughtfully across the water to where a kingfisher sat in watchful waiting. She continued slowly, choosing her words carefully, "I was brought up to hate them Morelands, but—I don't think I do. My people is jest like the Morelands. The biggest difference ye can find is that one side mostly has grey eyes like you and t'other side mostly

has brown eyes like me. All but their everlastin' fightin', they're good people, Bill Dale.

"Each side, ye see, is brought up to hate t'other side. I'm ashamed to tell it, but—I onderstand the fust plain words my Uncle Saul Littleford's last baby said was these here: '*Damn John Moreland!*' It started a long time ago, and it started over nothin'. Grandpap Littleford and John Moreland's pap got in a dispute over whether Kaintucky was in Virginny or Nawth Carolina, and went to fightin' about it. Purty soon my Uncle Saul and Abner Moreland happened along, and they went to fightin', too. Thank goodness, it was on Sunday, and none of 'em didn't have their rifles with 'em. Whatever else we are or ain't up here, Bill Dale, we gen'ally respects the Sabbath day to keep it holy. . . ."

"I see," Dale muttered sympathetically.

Babe lifted her rod until the small end was clear of the water again, and went on in a voice that throbbed.

"I've seen my own mother set down in the floor and take her boy's head in her lap—oh, such a big, fine boy he was!—while the blood run through her dress to her knees, blood from a Moreland's bullet. He died with mother's arms and mine around him. It was all we could do fo' him, was to love him. I've seen sisters watch their brothers die from Moreland bullets, and young wimmen watch their sweetheart's die, and wives watch their husbands die. . . ."

"I tell you, Bill Dale, them Morelands never misses when they have even half a fair shot. You'd be perfectly safe in a-lettin' any of 'em shoot dimes from

atween yore finger and thumb all day. And it's the same way with the Littlefords. They're fighters, too, every one, and they don't give in any more than the Morelands does.

"Addie Moreland knows what it is to take her dyin' boy's head in her lap, whilst the blood run through her dress to her knees. His name was Charley, and he was bad; he'd drink, and oncet he shot up Cartersville. But Addie, she allus loved him better'n Cale or Luke. Wimmen like her allus loves the worst boys the best; 'cause they need it the most, the worst boys does.

"It's the wimmen that pays, Bill Dale, when the's fightin'. The wimmen o' this valley is right now on needles; they're afeard the men'll find their rifles. You can guess whar the guns went to now, cain't ye? The wimmen hid 'em last night atter the men had gone to sleep! By good luck, they had almost a whole night fo' it. You must be shore to keep it to yoreself—but I know ye will. Addie Moreland, she started the idee. She got Granny Moreland to spread the word amongst the wimmen o' my people. When the fightin' fever sort o' dies down, the guns'll all be brought back and put whar they belong."

She arose and stood there smiling down upon him. He was staring at the swirling water without seeing it at all.

Her voice brought him to himself:

"What're you a-thinkin' about, Bill Dale?"

Dale went to his feet. He saw that she was smiling, and he smiled, too.

"I was thinking," he said, "of the difference between you and some other women I know."

Her clear brown eyes widened. "And I reckon I seem purty no 'count, don't I?"

"No. Not at all. It is—er, quite the opposite, Babe. You make them appear unreal, artificial."

Babe Littleford's countenance brightened. She did not doubt that he meant it. He was not of the sort that flattered. She began to like Bill Dale at that same moment.

And Bill Dale told himself as he went homeward that he was beginning to like Babe Littleford. He did not fight the feeling, because it somehow made the world seem a better place.

CHAPTER VII

ALMOST A MARTYR

EARLY the following morning, Dale made ready for his journey to Cincinnati. Having learned the evening before that he was going, By Heck had come to accompany him to the Halfway Switch. Heck became very enthusiastic and declared that he would like to go clean to Cincinnati, just for the sake of seeing the town; and he looked decidedly blue when John Moreland told him, with a sly wink at Dale, that Cincinnati was made up almost wholly of revenue officers.

Heck finally became desperate about it. He didn't care, he said, if Cincinnati was twice as big 'as Cartersville and made up altogether of revenueurs; he'd lick them, just as he'd always licked revenueurs!

"I shore wisht ye could see yore way clear to le' me go with ye," he growled into his long and drooping moustache. "Ef ye could, Bill, old boy, I'd take along a jug o' yaller cawn whisky twenty year old."

"Which was made the day before yesterday," laughed Dale.

Heck was forced to admit it.

The two set out for the Halfway Switch. They had three hours in which to cross David Moreland's Moun-

tain before the arrival of Dale's train, and they walked leisurely.

They had not gone a dozen rods when there came from somewhere down near the river the sound of a rifleshot. Both stopped and faced about quickly.

"I'll be dadgummed ef the Littlefords ain't found their weepsons!" exclaimed By Heck. "They have, igod, as shore as dangit!"

"How do you know?" Dale's voice was troubled.

"I shore know," and Heck narrowed his gaze. "'At was Ben Littleford's old .45 Winch. I'd know that gun ef I heered it at the nawth pole. The bar'l it's been cut off, and it don't sound like other Winchesters. Plague take my hide, Bill—I feel like we was a-goin' to hear somethin' drap hard!"

"Caleb Moreland was down near the river cleaning out the springhouse ditch," Dale muttered, facing his companion. "I think we'd better go back."

Together they went back to the cabin. John Moreland and his wife and their son Luke were standing at the weatherbeaten front gate, with their eyes turned anxiously toward the river. Caleb was coming up through the meadow, and he carried his hat in his hand.

"Who fired that shot?" asked Dale.

"Ben Littleford," John Moreland answered readily.

Two minutes later, Caleb leaped the old rail fence on the other side of the road and approached them hastily. He was breathing rapidly, and his strong young face was drawn and pale—with the old hate.

"Well," said his iron father, "what is it?"

Caleb held up his broad-rimmed black hat and ran

a finger through a hole in the upper part of the crown's peak.

"He didn't miss!" snapped John Moreland.

"No," quickly replied Caleb, "he didn't miss. He don't never miss. You know that, pap, as well as ye know God made ye. He done it jest to show me he meant what he said. He told me to go and tell you to gether up yore set o' rabbit-hearted heatherns and come down to the river fo' a lead-and-powder picnic, onless ye was a-skeered to come! He said to tell ye the wimmenfolks had hid our guns, and we'd find 'em onder the house floors."

John Moreland took it with utter calmness, though his face was a little pale behind his thick brown beard. He turned to his wife, who looked at him squarely.

"Addie, honey," said he, "I'm mighty sorry."

"Ef—ef you was much sorry, John," Mrs. Moreland half sobbed, "ye wouldn't go down thar to the river."

"Me a coward?" Moreland appeared to grow an inch in stature. "Me let a Littleford send me news like this here which Cale brings, and not do nothin' at all about it? I thought you knowed me better'n that, Addie."

He faced his two stalwart sons. Always he was the general, the leader of his clan. He sent Caleb in one direction, and Luke in another, to arouse his kinsmen.

Then he beckoned to Dale, who had been trying hard but vainly to think of something to do or say that would be of aid to the cause of the women.

"I don't want you in this here mix-up," he said decisively. "You must stay clean out of it. You ain't

ised to this way o' fightin'. Asides, you're our hope. More'n that, mebbe, you owe yore life to Babe Littleford; ye cain't git around that, Bill Dale."

He went on, after a moment, "Ef I git my light put out to-day, I want ye to do the best ye can with the coal. But o' course ye will. Somehow I got a notion, Bill, 'at this here ain't a-goin' to be no ord'nary fight. When all o' both sides gits into it this-away, the's allus lights put out, and gen'ally lots of 'em. I want ye to do me two favors, Bill Dale, ef I have my light put out to-day. Will ye do 'em fo' me, my friend?"

"Certainly," Dale promised.

"Much obleeged to ye, shore. The fust is this: I want ye to take good pay out o' what the coal brings, pay fo' yore work. The second is this: I want ye to go to Ben Littleford attar I'm gone—pervided he is yit alive—and tell him about the end o' my bedtime prayer; I want him to know I went him one better, 'at I was a bigger man inside 'an him. Remember, Bill, you've done promised me. Now you go ahead to Cincinnati, and do jest like ye didn't know the least thing about this trouble we're a-goin' to have. So long to ye, and good luck!"

"I don't like the idea——" Dale began, when the big hillman interrupted sharply:

"Go on! You cain't do no good here!"

Heck started. Dale turned and followed the lanky moonshiner; there seemed to be nothing else to do.

A battle between the factions was not such a new thing to By Heck. He sang as he toiled ahead of Dale up the crooked and rainwashed path:

THE CLAN CALL

Oh, when I die, don't-a bury me deep,
Put no tombstone at my head and feet,
Put a bear's jawbone in my right hand
On my way to the Prom-ised La-a-and,
Oh! On my way to the Promised Land!

When they had reached a point a little way above the foot of David Moreland's Mountain, the pair halted and looked back. They saw the Littlefords and the Morelands, every one of them armed, going toward the river. It had a strange and subtle fascination for Bill Dale, a fascination that he did not then try to understand.

As the fighters reached dangerous ground, they dropped to their hands and knees and began to crawl through the tall grasses, the ironweed and the meadow clover. They were intent upon reaching the shelter of the trees that lined the banks of the river without being seen. The stream here was more than fifty yards wide; this was Blue Cat Shoals. The two lines of trees stood back a rod or so from the water, making the final shooting distance some seventy yards.

Drawled Heck, "Le's set down here and watch it; hey?"

Dale was silent. The very air was filled with the spirit of tragedy. The faroff tinkle of a cowbell seemed tragic; tragic, too, sounded the song of a bird somewhere in the tree branches overhead.

"Did ye hear me, Bill?"

"I think," Dale muttered, "that I'd better not go away until to-morrow. I can't leave matters like this. Do you know of any way to stop that down there?"

By Heck shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Do you know o' any way to stop the risin' and settin' o' the sun?" he grinned.

They went back to John Moreland's cabin.

It was altogether by accident that the Littleford chief found his weapons. He had dropped a small coin through a crack in the floor. Babe was quick to say that she would crawl under the house and look for the coin, although she had just put on a freshly-laundered blue-and-white calico dress. Her anxiety showed plainly in her face. Her father questioned her sharply, and she stammered in spite of herself. Ben Littleford's suspicions were aroused.

So Ben Littleford came out from under the cabin floor with his hands full of the steel of rifle barrels, and with the money forgotten. He placed the rifles carefully on the floor of the porch, turned and caught his daughter by the arm.

"Who hid 'em?" he demanded gruffly.

"I hid 'em," was the ready answer, defiant and bitter—"I, me! What're you a-goin' to do about it?"

Littleford flung his daughter's arm from him. He was king, even as John Moreland was king. His keen eyes stared at the young woman's face as though they would wither it.

"What made ye hide 'em?" he growled. "Say, what made ye do it?"

"To try and save human lives, 'at's why!" Babe answered. "That man from the city—what'll he think o' us a-doin' this-away, a-fightin' like crazy wildcats?"

"Ef he don't like the way we do here, he can go back

home," retorted the angry mountaineer. "He ain't tied, is he?"

Babe smiled a smile that was somehow pitiful, and turned off.

"The' ain't no use in a-argyin' with you, pap," she said hopelessly. "I—I might' nigh wisht I was dead."

At that instant the gate creaked open. Babe glanced toward it and saw coming that black beast of a man, Adam Ball the Goliath, and he was armed heavily; in one hand he carried a new high-power repeating rifle, and around his great waist there was a new belt bristling with long, bright smokeless cartridges fitted with steel-jacketed bullets.

When Dale and his companion reached the cabin, Addie Moreland met them. Anxiety was breaking her heart.

"Mr. Dale," she pleaded, "I want you to go down thar to the river and see ef the's anything ye can do to stop it afore it begins. You jest walk out bold in the open and ye won't be shot at, and I'll be obleeged to ye. Oh, I know the' ain't but one chanst in ten thousand, but I'm a-prayin' ye'll strike that one chanst."

Dale knew that he could do nothing toward bringing peace, and he knew that John Moreland would be angry at his interfering. But he nodded and went toward the river. He didn't have the heart in him to refuse.

As he crossed the old rail fence into the green meadow, he frightened a lark that had been singing to the rising sun. The little sun-worshipper flew a hun-

dred feet, alighted, and began to sing again. The wild bees were humming about the purple crowns of the ironweed and the scarlet bloom of the meadow clover——

Then there came the keen thunder of a rifle shot.

Dale halted for a moment. Between two sycamores on the nearer side of the river he saw a puff of smoke rising lazily from behind a wateroak on the farther side; a Littleford had fired first. Dale went on, moving rapidly and trying to keep himself always in plain view.

Then came a puff of white smoke and a report from one of the Moreland rifles, then shots from both sides—and the battle was on. Dale heard the nasty whine of a bullet in full flight; he heard the coarse zzz of a half-spent ricochet. He knew that he was in some danger now, and he was surprised to find that he was not frightened.

When he halted again, it was on his knees behind the big white sycamore that sheltered John Moreland.

"Back, are ye?" frowned the mountaineer. And with the grimmest humour, "I reckon ye had a fine, large time in Cincinnaty. Yore friend Harris was well, I hope. Git that money from him?"

"Cut that out," said Bill Dale. "It doesn't get us anywhere——"

A bullet threw particles of sycamore bark to his face, interrupting. John Moreland pointed to a green furrow in the side of the tree.

"Ben Littleford hisself," said Moreland. "He's ahind o' that wateroak acrost thar. Don't stick yore head out!"

The mountaineer turned his gaze over Dale's shoulder, and his countenance seemed to freeze. Dale looked around quickly and saw Babe Littleford, less than ten feet behind him! She had crept up through the tall grasses and weeds. In one hand she carried a white flag made of a man's handkerchief and a willow switch. She halted and sat up.

"Babe!" Dale cried out. "What are you doing here?"

Babe gave him a pale smile. She opened her lips to speak, when John Moreland broke in angrily:

"This ain't no place fo' you. You git away from here."

Babe went pale.

"Ef pap'd shoot me, a-thinkin' I was a Moreland, mebbe it'd stop the everlastin' fightin'," she said.

John Moreland stared, and Bill Dale stared. They were in a Presence, and they knew it. Babe went on:

"I've come to save all o' yore lives; but ef I do it, ye'll haf to make yore men quit a-fightin' right now—jest order 'em to stop a-shootin', and hold up this here—and I promise ye on a Littleford's word 'at pap'll call ye a better man 'an him 'cause ye done it——"

She tossed the white flag to him. "The' ain't no time to lose, John Moreland; hold up the flag! Ef ye don't, ye'll every one be killed, 'cause ye're every one in a trap!"

"I don't believe ye, Babe!" snapped the Moreland chief. "Yore people can hold up a white rag jest as well as we can!"

Babe went paler. There was a sudden burst of firing from the Moreland rifles, and she crept a little nearer

to John Moreland in order that he might hear plainly that which she had to tell him next.

"I'm a-goin' to tell ye o' this danger," she said, "and trust to you a-bein' man enough to do what I axed ye to. Black Adam Ball, he's got a new-fashioned rifle and smokeless ca'tridges and steel bullets; and in a few minutes he'll be hid in a clum o' sassafras back thar in yore meadow, whar he means to set and pick off you Morelands one by one—and you and Bill Dale fust, 'count o' the beatin's you two put on him! But pap had nothin' to do with it, and rickollect that! Now I've saved all o' yore lives, 'cause ye couldn't ha' heered the sound o' his rifle in all o' this noise; and ye couldn't ha' seed the smoke o' his gun, 'cause it don't make no smoke. Hold up the white flag, John Moreland—hurry!"

Babe thoughtlessly arose to her feet, and one side of her brown head appeared before the sights of her father's rifle—her father fired quickly, too quickly for a perfect aim—the bullet burned its way across her temple and through her hair, and she crumpled at Bill Dale's knees, totally unconscious. Dale gave a hoarse cry and gathered her limp figure into his arms. John Moreland waved aloft the white handkerchief and bel-lowed to his kinsmen to stop firing. Then silence came.

"Come over here, Ben Littleford!" shouted John Moreland. "Ye've shot yore own gyurl!"

And to his brother, Abner, whose right forearm was wrapped in a blood-stained blue bandana:

"Black Adam is hid som'eres in this meadow; go and ketch him, and don't take no chanst with him. Shoot him like a dawg ef he tries to trick ye!"

A dozen men ran to look for the would-be sniper. The Littlefords, still armed, came dashing across the river. Ben Littleford threw down his rifle and knelt beside his daughter; he wrung his big hands and cursed the day that had seen him born.

Dale held her close. His face was as white as hers, and his eyes were flaming.

"Why don't you shoot all your womenfolk?" he said to the Littleford chief, and every word cut like a knife. "It's by far the simplest way; it's merciful, y'know. See, she isn't breaking her heart over your murderous fighting, now. No, keep your hands away—you're not fit to touch her."

They brought water and wet the young woman's face, and bathed the red streak across her temples. They did all they knew to do to bring her back to consciousness, but, except for her beating pulse and her breathing, she remained as one dead. Hours passed, leaden hours, and her condition was unchanged.

Dale beckoned to John Moreland, who had just returned from having seen Adam Ball caught, disarmed, and imprisoned in an old tobacco-barn. Moreland hastened to Dale, the new master.

"When does the next south-bound train pass the Halfway Switch?" Dale wanted to know.

Moreland looked toward the sun.

"We could make it, all right, but it's a fast train, and it don't never stop at the Switch."

"Then we'll hold it up," declared the new master in a voice of iron. "This is a case for a surgeon. Get a blanket and two poles, and make a litter."

John Moreland hastened away obediently. Dale

turned to Ben Littleford, who sat in a motionless heap beside the still figure of his daughter.

"It was only a few hours ago," he said accusingly, "that this poor girl told me she'd be glad to give her life to stop your fighting, and now, perhaps, she's done it! You're a brute, Littleford. I like to fight, myself, but not when it costs women anything."

The conscience-stricken hillman gave no sign that he had heard. There was silence save for the low murmur of the river and the tragic song of a bird somewhere in the branches of the big white sycamore.

CHAPTER VIII

BACK HOME

EVERY mother's son of the feudists was numbered in the party that filed across David Moreland's Mountain to intercept the next south-bound train. The old enmity was for the time being forgotten. Members of one clan rubbed elbows with members of the other clan, and thought nothing of it. John Moreland himself carried one end of the crude litter that held the limp form of Babe Littleford; Bill Dale carried the other end.

Close behind the litter walked Babe's father, seeming old and broken with remorse for the thing he had done. The grief of Ben Littleford was touching now, and Dale was a little sorry that he had spoken so bitterly to him.

They reached the Halfway Switch ten minutes before the arrival of the fast mail. A short passenger train was on the long siding, waiting for the south-bound to pass. Dale gave over his end of the litter to Caleb Moreland, and strode up to the locomotive. The engineer sat quietly smoking in his cab.

Dale wanted the fast mail stopped, and he gave his reasons.

The engineer smoked and considered. It was against rules. Dale swore at rules. The engineer said he would

see the conductor. He did, and the conductor stepped to the ground and began to consider.

"Better put her on my train," he said finally, "and take her to Barton's Station. There's a good doctor at Barton's——"

"But this is a case for a surgeon!" impatiently interrupted Bill Dale.

They disagreed. The old trainman was a close friend of the doctor at Barton's Station. What was the difference between a doctor and a surgeon, anyway?

Dale became angry.

"You'll stop the fast mail for us," he snapped, "or we'll take your damned red flag and hold her up long enough to put the girl aboard, and you've got only half a second to decide which!"

The conductor was obdurate. The mountain men were too hot-headed to bear with him longer. The positions of a dozen rifles underwent a sudden change. The conductor immediately went pale and mentioned the law—but he agreed to stop the southbound.

As he ordered his flagman up the tracks, the sound of the fast train's whistle came to their ears.

The flier came to a screeching halt with sparks streaming from its wheels. Bill Dale and John Moreland passed the litter and its burden into the baggage-car and followed it hastily, and Ben Littleford climbed in after them. John Moreland leaned out of the doorway and ordered his son, Luke, to pass him his rifle, and Luke obeyed promptly.

There was a shriek from the whistle, and the brakes were released; the train soon began to gather mo-

mentum. A baggageman approached John Moreland and asked why the rifle. Moreland half closed one keen grey eye and patted the walnut stock of his repeater.

"Oh, I jest brought it along to see 'at everybody has a straight deal," he drawled—"go on about yore business, Mister."

The baggageman went about his business.

The conductor of the fast train was very unlike the conductor of the northbound. When he had learned something of the circumstances, he insinuated that Dale had done exactly the right thing. He would see whether there was a doctor aboard.

Within five more minutes he returned in company with an elderly man wearing a pointed beard and nose-glasses.

"Doctor McKenzie," he said politely; "Mr. ——"

"Dale."

The two nodded, and the physician knelt beside the litter, which had been placed with its ends on boxes to allow the centre to swing free. He made as thorough an examination as was possible under the conditions, then arose and stood looking down upon the young woman with something like admiration in his sober, professional eyes.

"Perfect physique," he said as though to himself. ". . . She will have to undergo an operation," he told Dale. "The bone there is broken in slightly, making a compression; she will doubtless be unconscious until the pressure is relieved. But she has fine chances for a quick and entire recovery, with a good surgeon on the job, so there's not much ground for worry."

Dale was glad. They were all glad. Ben Littleford

nervously in his sudden joy. He went down to
s beside his daughter, took up one of her limp
nd stroked it in a way that was pitiful.

he arose, he spoke cordially to Moreland.
reland didn't reply. He still looked upon his
y with contempt.

or McKenzie was leaving the train at the next
importance, and he would wire Doctor Braemer
them with an ambulance, if Dale wished.

ou please," said Dale.

reached the city shortly before midnight, and
mptly met by the surgeon, a stocky, bald man
perpetual smile. Braemer took charge of the
put her into his ambulance, and hurried her
private hospital. Bill Dale and the two clan
ollowed in an automobile. The hillmen had
fore seen an automobile; but they asked no
s about it, and the only word of comment was
m John Moreland:

n't like the smell."

thing had been made ready for the operation,
e received surgical aid without delay.

wo mountaineers and Dale waited in another
dale had induced John Moreland to unload his
h chamber and magazine. Babe's father paced
a trifle anxiously now and then. Moreland sat
one, with his empty rifle between his knees, and
his old enemy queerly.

med a long time before Braemer came to them
them smilingly that it was all over and that
was then coming out from under the effects
her. She would be all right soon, he was reason-

ably certain. No, they'd better not see her just then. But perhaps they could see her at some time during the afternoon of the following day.

Dale escorted his two companions to a modest hotel and then put them in a room that had but one bed; by thus throwing them together in a strange land, he hoped to do something toward making them friends. Then Dale went to another room, undressed and went to bed.

It may be noted, parenthetically as it were, that John Moreland and Ben Littleford quickly reached a wordless agreement not to sleep together—they divided the pillows and linens evenly, tore the odd coverlet exactly in half, and slept on the floor.

When Dale went down to the lobby the following morning, an alert-eyed young fellow sprang from a chair and hastened up to him.

"By George, Bobby!" Dale exclaimed, as they began to shake hands. "How did you know I was here, anyway? Your boasted nose for news, eh?"

"Guilty," smiled McLaurin. "I got word last night that a mountain girl had been brought to Braemer's, accidentally shot, and I smelled a feud; so I hurried over to get the story. You had just left, and Braemer's didn't know much about it. It was too soon after the operation, they said, for her to see me; then one of the nurses whispered to me that you had brought her, and said that I would find you here. So here I am, Bill, and I want the story. I'll 'phone it in, and then I'll give you some news."

"The story mustn't be published, Bobby," Dale replied. "For one reason, there is a feud; and if the law

knew, it might take a hand—you see, I think there is a better way to take care of that feud. And I am of the opinion that the girl wouldn't like the publicity. There wouldn't be a great deal in it for you, anyway. Suppose you forget all about it, Bobby."

If McLaurin was disappointed, he kept it well to himself.

"They said she was handsome, a sort of primitive Venus," he winked. "Is there a romance connected, Bill?"

"Not yet," smiled Dale.

"But soon?"

"Who can tell?" Dale shrugged a little. "Tell me the news."

"All right." McLaurin drew his friend toward a pair of empty chairs. "I married Patricia Clavering the day before yesterday. We——"

"Bully! Go on."

"We were married in an automobile, with her father and 'poor dear Harry' chasing us like wildfire in another car. Yesterday we went to housekeeping in a cute little suburban bungalow, furniture on the instalment plan. Her people won't even look at us, Bill! But do we care? Bill Dale, I ask you, old dear, do I seem to be worrying? Honest, I'm so happy I'm afraid something is going to happen to me. I'm to have a lift in salary soon, and we won't be long in paying for the furniture; and when that's done, we'll buy the bungalow.

"And I'm informing you now, old savage," he continued, "that you're having dinner with us this evening. You'll find it pleasant. We do as we please, you see.

If you like, you may stir your coffee with your finger, eat with your knife, reach clean across the table, and pick your teeth with your fork. You can eat with your hat on, and you may have your dessert first. You can have an extra chair for your feet, and you can go to sleep at the table. Don't fail us. Pat wants to thank you for 'casting her aside' at the altar."

Dale laughed boyishly. McLaurin went on:

"There's more news. Your father has been trying hard to find you. He sent a man to Atlanta to look for you. He told me he'd give me a house and lot if I'd find you—and if there was a little more of the high-way robber in me, I'd call his hand!"

"And mother—have you seen her?" Dale muttered.

"I've seen her twice since the near-wedding."

"Did she have anything to say about me? Tell me the whole truth, Bobby. I can take it, old man. I'm big enough."

McLaurin frowned. "Since you've asked me, Bill, your mother—I overheard her telling your father that she would never forgive you for the 'utterly shameless, disgraceful scene' you made in church. The papers—not mine, though—made the most of it, especially that iconoclastic *Herald*."

"I see," said Dale. He brightened and went on, "As soon as I can get my two friends down to the dining-room, Bobby, you're going with me to father. We're going to claim that house and lot for you."

"For Patricia's sake, I've a thundering big notion to take you up," laughed McLaurin. "Ybur dad would never miss it."

"That's it—take me up for Pat's sake," said Dale,

rising. "You'd be foolish if you didn't. You should be willing to do anything, almost, for Pat. She's a jewel, Bobby."

Half an hour later they caught a passing car that soon carried them to a palace of granite and stone and cream-coloured brick—the home of the old coal king, John K. Dale.

At the wide front gateway young Dale drew back.

"Bring father out here," he said in a low voice. "From what you told me, I guess mother wouldn't want me to come in. But you can find out about that——"

He hoped his mother would want to see him. While she had never seemed to care for him as other mothers cared for their boys; while she hadn't been quite so dear to him as she might have been——

"And if she wants to see me, Bobby, let me know."

McLaurin smiled a somewhat worried smile, and went up to the front door. The old servant, Isham, met him and took his card, and a moment later he was shown in. Yet another moment, and John K. Dale, his florid face beaming with gladness, hastened out to the gateway. Young Dale was instantly touched by his father's new attitude toward him; then he remembered the long night of David Moreland's people, and he stiffened a little and drew back a pace.

"You've come home to stay, haven't you, Carlyle?" said the older man, and his voice was filled with pleading. "What you did is all right; we'll never mention it again. You'll stay, won't you, Carlyle, my boy?"

"No," answered the son, a trifle coldly in spite of himself. "I've spent all the idle, useless years I'll ever

spend. I'm getting ready to develop the coal in David Moreland's Mountain."

"David—Moreland's—Mountain!"

The retired coal magnate breathed the three words in a husky tone. He put forth a hand and rested it against one of the huge stone gateposts, as though to steady himself, and some of the colour went from his face.

"You say David Moreland's Mountain, Carlyle?" jerkily.

"Yes."

"And you—you learned about David Moreland?"

"Yes." Bill Dale folded his arms and stood there looking at his father with eyes that accused.

"You know who killed him?" old Dale muttered.

"I do, and it was a shame—a black shame."

"Yes, it was a black shame. Nobody knows that half so well as I know it," said John K. Dale. His mouth quivered. He looked downward, looked up again. "Son, you can never say or think worse things about me than I have said and thought about myself—because of that."

Dale the younger glanced toward the house. Robert McLaurin was coming slowly down the verandah steps. Mrs. Dale was nowhere in sight. She didn't want to see her son; she didn't even want him in the house. Bill Dale read it all in his friend's downcast countenance, and it was somehow a great disappointment.

"You'll need money, if you're going to develop that coal property," Dale the elder was saying. "You haven't any money, and those mountainfolk haven't any. I'll give you all that's needed. I'll send you

mining machinery, and expert mining men; I'll——"

"You needn't," broke in the embittered Bill Dale. "I can get the necessary funds without difficulty. I'll pay the debt myself. You've had a great many years in which to try to make amends, and you haven't done anything. You might have helped the Morelands without their even knowing that it was you—especially as they seem to have known you by another name—and that's the only way you could have helped them. Here you have one reason why I cannot accept assistance from you; don't you see, father? The Morelands wouldn't have it, and I couldn't lie to them."

He motioned to McLaurin, who had halted on the lower verandah step in order that he might not overhear, and turned and walked away. McLaurin followed, and soon overtook him.

Bill Dale stopped suddenly and faced back to his father.

"Remember that Bobby gets his house and lot!"

"Yes," replied John K. Dale, "Bobby gets his house and lot."

He went sadly toward the mansion that seemed to him now a good deal like a tomb. Young Dale touched his friend on the arm.

"Tell me, what did mother say? I know it's going to hurt, but—tell it."

"She was sitting beside an open window in the library," said McLaurin. "I told her that you were at the gate, and asked if she would like to see you. At first I was afraid she hadn't heard me. Then she opened a book that she was reading, found her place and marked it with a finger, and looked toward me."

“Who did you say was at the gate, Mr. McLaurin she asked.

“Your son Carlyle,’ I answered.

“Mr. McLaurin,’ she said to me coldly, ‘I want never to forget this: To me there is no such person on earth as Carlyle Dale.’”

They went downtown in silence.

CHAPTER IX

LONESOME

WHEN John Moreland and Ben Littleford had finished their breakfast there in the dining-room of the Blaisdell, they drank the water in their fingerbowls, threatened with sudden death waiter who snickered, and found the way to the

Littleford the minutes dragged soddenly. Finally old Moreland, in a sentence filled with double negatives, that he could bear his suspense no longer, and posed that they set out at once for Doctor Bræ's hospital. The hotel manager overheard some of one-sided conversation; he 'phoned the surgeon and ned that the young woman was resting easily, which rmation he passed on to the mountain men.

Ben Littleford was quiet for five minutes, more or . Then he again proposed to John Moreland that go to the hospital to see Babe. Moreland refused y, and accompanied his refusal with an unmistak-look of contempt.

You're as restless as a dawg in a flea town," he his old enemy, and with that he walked away.

A few minutes later Ben Littleford stole out unced by his neighbour from the Big Pine, and went a brisk gait up the street. Moreland found it out

shortly afterward; he followed the Littleford chief hot-foot, and overtook him. Trust your hill dweller to note landmarks when he goes into unknown territory—Littleford was headed straight for the hospital.

They walked for two blocks in silence. Moreland had assumed the attitude of one who has had the guardianship of an irresponsible person thrust upon him. But soon he softened somewhat.

"I shore can't onderstand, Ben," he drawled, "how Bill Dale ever could bear it to live here."

"I wonder," Littleford said absent mindedly, as though he had not heard, "whar Bill Dale is at? It's mighty durned lonesome without him, ain't it? That was good ham we had fo' breakfus', John."

"It wasn't ham. It was beef."

"It was ham."

"It was beef."

"It was ha——"

"Don't ye reckon," flared John Moreland, "that I know a dang cow's meat when I see it? It was beef!"

They had halted in the middle of a stream of pedestrians. A policeman crowded his way to them.

"Move on!" he growled.

Bill Dale was at that moment entering the lobby of the Blaisdell with Robert McLaurin at his side. Dale had just told McLaurin that he meant to go to Cincinnati to borrow money from his wealthy friend Harris. Then McLaurin told Dale something that saved him the journey to Cincinnati.

"You haven't heard about Harris, Bill? I'm sorry, because he would have accommodated you. He went

broke a few days ago in the cotton smash. He was here yesterday, and left last night for Cincy."

Dale did not try to conceal his surprise and disappointment. Harris, for all his youth, had been a business marvel.

"I'll have to try somebody here, I guess. But I won't take it from father—mother wouldn't permit it, anyway, if she knew—and there are several other reasons. Queer how a fellow's mother would turn him down like this! Usually, y'know, it's a fellow's mother that sticks by him the longest. . . .

"I wonder where I could find old Newton Wheatley, of the Luther-Wheatley Iron Company? I know him, all right. He always liked me, Bobby."

"You'll find him at home," McLaurin answered. "He's out of business, and here all the time now. He might take a shot at coal. Why not 'phone him from here?"

"I'll do that," Dale decided. "Look up my two friends for me, Bobby, will you?"

He was soon speaking to Newton Wheatley. He was brief in stating his wishes. To the question as to why he did not go to his father for funds—well, he had his reasons, and it was rather a private matter. Wheatley, of course, remembered the near-wedding.

The old iron man was silent for what seemed to Dale a very long time. Then his voice came over the wire with an almost ominous calm:

"Who besides you has seen this vein, Carlyle? Anybody that knows coal?"

"Yes, my father," Dale answered quickly. "He went over it years ago. Ask him about the coal in David

Moreland's Mountain. 'Phone him, and then 'phone me. I'm waiting at the Blaisdell."

Wheatley agreed a little reluctantly.

Dale waited patiently for fifteen minutes. Then the clerk called him to the 'phone. He took up the receiver with boyish eagerness.

Wheatley began cordially: "Your father tells me it is a good proposition, Carlyle, so I'll let you have all the money you'll need. And if you want a good mining man, I know where you can lay your hands on one; also I can furnish you, at half the original cost, all the necessary machinery and accessories. You didn't know the old Luther-Wheatley Company dickered in coal as well as iron; eh? Well, it did. Let me see you at three this afternoon——"

Dale was jubilant. Here was a rare stroke of good fortune. He went to McLaurin—who had not yet found John Moreland and Ben Littleford—and told him about it. McLaurin was almost as happy as Dale over it.

A bellboy appeared like a jack-in-a-box in the centre of the floor.

"Mistoh Cahlyle Dale! Mistoh Cahlyle Dale!"

Dale wheeled. "Well?"

"Wanted immejitly at Doctoh Braemeh's hossppittle, suh!"

Dale's cheeks lost some of their colour. He shook hands with McLaurin and hurried toward the street.

A few minutes later Doctor Braemer met him in the reception room.

"What's wrong, doctor?"

The surgeon beckoned. "Come with me."

He turned and led the way through a long corridor and to a sunny white room where Babe Littleford lay with a bandage about her temples. Ben Littleford was on his knees at his daughter's bedside; he was slowly wringing his big, rough hands and begging piteously to be forgiven.

Babe stared at him a trifle coldly. She had not yet seen the two men who stood in the doorway. Then she interrupted her father:

"You hush, pap, and go away. I'd told ye a hundred times about fightin' a-bein' mudder, and 'specially to us wimmenfolks, and you never would pay any 'tention to me. You hush, pap, and go away. Ef I die, I'll jest haf to die. And ef I die, I shore do want to die in peace. Go away, pap."

"But ye must live, Babe, honey!" Ben Littleford moaned. "Ef you was to die, what'd I do?"

"I don't know what ye'd do, pap," Babe said weakly. "You ought to thought o' that afore, pap. It may be too late now. I want ye to go on off and le' me alone. Ef I die, I want to die in peace. The Lord knows I never got to live in peace!"

There was a worried look in her wonderful brown eyes, and the doctor saw it. He strode forward decisively and helped Littleford to his feet. The hillman wiped away a tear with his faded blue bandana, and hung his head. He had been made a broken man in one day.

"Go out to your friend Moreland," smiled the doctor, "and wait there for a little while."

Babe's father walked unsteadily out of the room.

Dale went to Doctor Braemer and whispered, "Isn't she going to make it?" anxiously.

"Certainly, she's going to make it," Braemer assured him. "Go on; she wants to see you."

Dale drew a chair up close to the white bed and sat down. Babe's eyes lighted at once, and she put a hand uncertainly out toward him. Dale took the hand in his. He saw that it was a little pale under its delicate sunburn.

"Glad to see you, Babe," he told her softly. "Why do you think you're going to die, Babe?"

She smiled at him. "Why, I don't think I'm a-goin' to die," she said. "I know I'm a-goin' to live, Bill Dale; I feel like I could walk fifty miles right now!"

"But I heard you tell your father——"

"I was a-tryin' to skeer him out o' fightin' any more," she interrupted. "And I believe I 'bout done it, don't you?"

Dale was relieved. "I do. Is there anything you want, Babe? If there is, I'll get it for you if it's in the universe."

"The universe?" she repeated enquiringly. "What's the universe, Bill Dale? Somethin' to eat?"

"The world, the sun, the moon, and the stars."

She smiled at him again. "No," she said, "the' ain't nothin' I want, and the' ain't nothin' ye can do fo' me, I reckon."

"But I thought, as they sent for me——"

Babe Littleford's fingers held tightly to his. "It was me that sent fo' you."

She turned her face the other way. "I was so lonesome, Bill Dale!"

Robert McLaurin's wife Patricia visited Babe twice a week, and a friendship that was none the less warm and being unique sprang up quickly between them. Patricia declared to her husband that she was going to keep Babe,—whom she was already calling by her proper name, the same being Elizabeth,—and educate her.

There was room in the bungalow, Patricia said; she really needed company, because Bobby was lonely so much.

Babe accepted little Mrs. McLaurin's offer as soon as Bill Dale convinced her that she wouldn't be merely the object of charity. The hill pride's first law is that one must pay for what he gets—and it's probably the same law God laid down for old Adam in Eden. Ben Littleford seemed bewildered and blue when they told him of the arrangement, but he voiced no objection. He pressed upon him a loan of a hundred dollars, and ordered him to give it to his daughter, which he did. Elizabeth Littleford, of course, would need new cloth-

"I ain't even got any dresses at home," she whispered to Patricia, "but two."

Bill Dale was sure now that he loved Babe, and he was almost sure that she cared for him. But he was not yet properly in no haste to come to an understanding. He had known all along that Babe would have to be educated; and a woman's tastes, he reasoned, might change with education. And he wanted her to have the opportunity of knowing other men of his class. If she didn't love him with a lasting love, he didn't want to love him at all.

Oddly or not, he never thought of Jimmy Fayne.

CHAPTER X

MAJOR BRADLEY AND HENDERSON GOFF

WHEN Bill Dale, the expert mining man Hayes and the two mountaineers stepped from a short passenger train at the Halfway Switch, they were approached by the moonshiner, Heck, and a man whom Dale had never seen before. He was tall, and his bearing was erect and soldierlike, though he was every day of sixty years old. His eyes were blue and twinkling with everlasting good humour; his grey moustaches and imperial were exceedingly well cared for; his teeth were his own, and as white as a school-girl's, and they bore out his general air of neatness. He was, plainly, a Southerner of the old type.

"Who's that?" whispered Dale to John Moreland.

But Moreland didn't hear. He ran forward with his right hand outstretched, and so did Ben Littleford. Men could not have greeted a brother with more gladness, Dale thought.

"Hi, thar, Major Bradley!" the hillman cried. "And how d'ye come on to-day?"

"I am very well, gentlemen, thank you," said the major, smiling.

He shook their hands heartily. "The trainmen gave us your message yesterday," he went on, still smiling, "and we were delighted to learn that the young woman

was out of danger. I trust you are all in good health, gentlemen."

They assured him that they were. Moreland turned to introduce Bill Dale and the mining man. From the moment that Major Bradley gripped Dale's hand they were friends.

"Mighty glad to know you, sir!" exclaimed the old lawyer. "I've been hearing a great deal about you, sir, over in the valley of the Doe. They seem to think there's nobody just like Bill Dale! It was Bill Dale this, and Bill Dale that; it was 'Here's where Bill Dale whipped Black Adam,' or, 'Here's where Bill Dale was standing when such-and-such happened,' or, 'Here's where Bill Dale crossed the fence!'"

"Hah-hah-hah!" sluggishly laughed By Heck, who stood leaning on the muzzle of his rifle. "Bill Dale is all right, major; ye've shore got my word fo' that."

The others laughed. Then John Moreland said they'd better be moving, or they'd be late for dinner.

When they had put a hundred yards of David Moreland's Mountain behind them, the old Southerner tugged slyly at Dale's sleeve and whispered:

"Let us fall behind a little, if you please. I want to speak with you privately."

They began to lag, and soon there was a distance of several rods between them and the others.

"I heard through Addie Moreland," began Bradley, his friendly hand on the younger man's arm, "about you and what you're planning to do for the Morelands. I tell you, sir, I thanked heaven for your coming, and you may count on me to help in any way I can. The Morelands are quite friendly to me now, though up to

the middle of last summer they didn't like me any too well because I made Ben Littleford's cabin my home when out here.

"It was a simple thing that brought us together. John Moreland's little nephew was lost in the woods, and his mother was frantic. There are panthers, you know, and wildcats, rattlers, and copperheads. I was fortunate enough to find the boy. He had stubbed a toe, and it was bleeding; I tied it up in one of my handkerchiefs, and carried him home. That was all. They're a fine people, my boy, and so are the Littlefords. Good old English blood that somehow wandered off. There's no purer, cleaner blood in America, sir.

"And now—how are you getting along with your plans for the operation of the coal mine?"

"Excellently," answered Dale. "We have the necessary finance; a geared locomotive and cars and light steel rails have been bargained for; and there is to be a siding put in for us near the Halfway Switch immediately."

"Good!" Bradley gave Dale a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"There's something else I wanted to say, Mr. Dale," he continued, his voice grave. "You're nearly certain to have a barrel of trouble with a shyster coal man named Henderson Goff. He's a villain, sir, if ever there was one! And he's quite the smoothest article I've ever seen. He can make you believe black is white, if only you'll listen to him long enough."

"Is he—has he been here recently?" Dale wanted to know.

"He's here now," answered the major. "He's been

here for three days, and he's been working devilment fast. He was up here last summer, trying to buy the Moreland coal for a song; he knows all the people, you see. As soon as he landed here on this present trip, he found out about your intentions. Then, at night, he freed Adam Ball from his tobacco barn prison, and went home with him.

"Well, By Heck followed them and did some eaves-dropping—poor By has his strong points!" the major went on. "Goff learned that Adam Ball's father knew about the coal vein long before David Moreland discovered it and got lawful possession of the mountain. Then Goff made the Balls believe that they were due a big share of the proceeds of the Moreland coal! It wasn't very hard to do, I guess. The Balls, this set, at least, were originally lowlanders; they took to the mountains, I understand, to keep from being forced to fight during the Civil War."

"Goff's idea," muttered Dale, "is to get the Balls to scare me into selling instead of developing, eh?"

"Exactly," nodded old Bradley. "Then he would settle with the Balls by giving them a dollar or two a day for digging coal; perhaps he would put them off until the mine was worked out for half of that, and then skip. Anyway, Goff would come out at the big end."

"I see," said Dale.

"If there's anything that I can do, at any time, you won't hesitate to let me know?" said the major.

"You may consider yourself attorney and legal adviser for the Moreland Coal Company, of which I have the honour to be general manager," smiled Dale, "if you will."

Major Bradley's voice came happily, "My dear boy, I am glad to accept! And there shall be no charge for any service that I may render."

They were not long in reaching the green valley, which lay very beautiful and very peaceful in the warm light of the early July sun. The soft murmuring of the crystal river and the low, slow tinkling of the cowbells made music that was sweet and pleasing.

Suddenly John Moreland stopped, uttered a swear-word under his breath, turned and went back to Dale.

"The's a man a-waitin' on us ahead thar, Bill," he drawled, "'at ye shore want to watch like a hawk to keep him from a-stealin' the eyeteeth out o' yore head. His name is Henderson Goff, and he wants coal."

They went on. Soon they met a man who, in clothing and in manner, made Dale think of stories he had heard and read of Mississippi River steamboat gamblers of the long ago. His eyes were black, and as keen as a pair of spear-points; his moustaches, too, were black, and they had sharp, upturned ends like those of a Mephisto. The major had said that he was a smooth article; he certainly looked it.

He met John Moreland with an oily smile and thrust out his hand. But Moreland wouldn't see the hand.

"Anything ye've got to say about coal," he growled, "ye can say to Bill Dale thar," pointing with a caloused thumb. "Bill he's the high light o' the whole business; and when he opens his mouth, ye can cock yore head to one side and listen fo' gawspel."

Goff was delighted to meet Mr. Dale, of whom he had already heard. Dale had nothing whatever to say. They walked on toward the cabin of the Moreland

chief, with Goff keeping up a running fire of talk concerning the scenery, the climate—anything but coal.

At John Moreland's gate, Goff nudged Dale with an elbow and whispered:

"Meet me at one o'clock down there where the big sycamore lies across the river. I've got something to tell you that will interest you."

He didn't wait for a reply, but turned away with By Heck. He went to the home of the Hecks ostensibly to have his fortune told—really, to get his dinner. The old woman didn't like him, but her inborn spirit of hospitality wouldn't permit her to refuse him a meal. She felt that she was almost even with him when, after shuffling and reading the cards, she told him that it would be wise for him to look out for a big, tall, grey-eyed young man with an oak tree in one hand and a couple of cliffs in the other!

Dale told Major Bradley and John Moreland of that which Goff had said to him at the gate. The major suggested forthwith that he go to meet the man; it couldn't possibly do any harm, and there was a chance that he would learn something of Goff's intentions.

So Dale went.

Goff was already there, waiting. He was sitting on a stone on the Moreland side of the river, whittling idly. When he saw Dale approaching, he smiled and nodded, rose and pocketed his knife.

"I want to make you an offer for that coal," he said at once.

"All right," Dale replied. "If your offer is big

enough, it will be considered. But no shyster price is going to get that coal, Goff."

Goff frowned uneasily.

"You don't know coal, Mr. Dale. You don't know the business of mining—or I've got you sized up wrong. Thousands of men have gone busted trying to do things they weren't used to doing. There's a big chance, too, that the coal isn't what it looks to be on the surface. You'd better take a sure thing, and avoid a possibility of loss. I'll give you five thousand, spot cash, for that coal."

Dale shook his head. "You'll have to come heavier than that, y'know, if you get the Moreland coal."

"And an extra thousand for yourself!"

Dale laughed a low, queer laugh. "You amuse me, Goff," said he. "Seems to me you've missed your calling in life. What a peach of a king-villain you'd make in melodrama! You wouldn't have to act, either; you'd have to be just your natural self. And you make me mad, too, Goff. Because I'm on the square with the Morelands and everybody else—now get that!"

The corners of the shyster coal man's mouth came down.

"Oh, bosh—don't pass me that virtue stuff. Every man has his price, high or low. You've got yours, and I've got mine. I'll give you five thousand, spot cash, if you'll persuade John Moreland to sell to me for five thousand, and nobody'll ever know you got a rakedown from me. It's all the coal is worth, that ten thousand. Well, yes?"

Dale was of the type that goes pale with anger, and he was pale now. He clenched his hands.

"You can't insult me like that and get away with it, Goff," he clipped. "We're going to fight, Goff, and I'm going to put a licking on you that fifteen horses can't pull off. Get me?"

He threw aside his coat and rolled his sleeves to his elbows. Henderson Goff ran his right hand quickly to a rear trouser pocket and brought back a stub-nosed automatic pistol, which he turned threateningly toward Bill Dale.

"Go easy, friend," Goff said very complacently. "There's no use in getting sore. I want the coal, that's all. If I can't get it by fair means, I'll get it in another way. Oh, I don't mind telling you; one man's oath is as good in court as another man's. If you don't take me up at ten thousand, I'll give you so much trouble that you'll be glad to sell it to me later for half that amount. The Balls think they own a big interest in that coal! There's a lot of them, too, and they can keep you from working the mine. Well, I can't waste time in dickering with you. What do you say?"

"I say," and Dale smiled an odd little smile, "that your plan appears to be perfect, except that you've overlooked one or two important details. For instance, there's the law, y'know."

"The law—now don't go and fool yourself!" exclaimed Goff. "The State couldn't afford to keep a hundred men here, month in and month out, just to protect your little mine. My patience is about gone, Dale—for the last time, what do you say?"

"I say that I'll beat you at any game you put up against me," very quietly. "Furthermore, I say that you are a coward and a scoundrel, and that you haven't

got the insides in you to fight me a fair man's fight. If you'll only pocket that thing you've got in your hand, I'll mow down half an acre of meadow bush with your body."

The other turned red, then white, then red again. Bill Dale's words had lashed him keenly. His eyes became like hard black beads, and he began to raise the wicked-looking pistol as though he meant to fire.

Then there was the sound of a breaking twig behind him, and a voice drawled out:

"Drap it, Mister—drap the funny little gun, or the middle o' Tarment is yore po'tion right now!"

It was the moonshiner, By Heck, and his rifle was levelled. Goff dropped the pistol. Heck grinned, advanced slowly, took up the weapon that the hillfolk call a "cowardsgun" and tossed it into the river.

"Now git—cut the mustard—light a rag away from here," he ordered, "afore I let Bill Dale loose on ye!"

Goff went away rapidly.

"I wonder if you heard him say anything that would make you valuable as a witness," muttered Dale, "in the event we want to have him arrested?"

"I heered you tell him 'at he was afeard to fight ye a fair man's fight, and 'at ef he'd pocket that thing he held in his hand ye'd mow down twenty acres o' meadow bush with his lowdown body—that'd be vallyble in co'te, wouldn't it?"

Dale smiled. Then he frowned.

CHAPTER XI

A SIGNAL VICTORY

THE mining man Hayes, the major and John Moreland were waiting at the gate when Dale, accompanied by the moonshiner, returned to the place. Dale was the first to speak. He told briefly of the fight which had taken place at the blown-down sycamore, and at the last of it By Heck straightened up proudly.

"I be dadjimmied ef I hadn't ha' pumped him so full ad 'at the' couldn't enough o' men got around him to get off his corpst, ef he hadn't ha' drapped the mardsgun," By Heck declared as fiercely as he could. "Cause maw she seed in the cup 'at Bill Dale was in' to be a right pa'tickler friend o' mine, igod, I has a habit o' takin' keer o' my friends. Now I was my Uncle Bill, him what could jump a sixteen-fence——"

"It was a nine-rail fence, By," impatiently cut in John Moreland. "You've done told that so much 'at the dang nigh wore out. S'posen ye go back thar to the orchard ahind o' the house and see what Cale and his a-doin'; hey, By?"

By Heck nodded and went toward the orchard. He knew they didn't want him to overhear what they were

going to say, but it didn't offend him. It wasn't easy to offend the good-natured Heck.

Moreland turned to Dale. "Well?"

Dale turned to Hayes.

"We're going to begin the building of the little railroad at the earliest possible moment. And because I don't know anything about the work, I'm going to ask you to take the lead. Now, there may be some fighting. I don't want you to go into this thing blindly, you see. If you're going to withdraw at all, do it now."

"I'm not a stranger to fighting," Hayes replied smilingly. "I've been through half a dozen coal strikes. I think you may count on me, Mr. Dale."

"Then lay out a plan for immediate action."

"I'd suggest," acquiesced Hayes, "that we send to the little town in the lowland for a supply of picks and shovels, axes and saws, hammers, drills, and explosives. In the meantime, you and I can stake out the way for the track."

It sounded businesslike, Dale thought.

Within the hour John Moreland and his son Caleb started for Cartersville on foot, and in the older man's pocket was money sufficient to buy the things that were needed.

Dale and Hayes set out for the north end of David Moreland's Mountain, and each of them carried a hand-axe for making stakes.

It was not often that the quiet Hayes permitted himself to go into raptures over anything; however, he went into raptures over the Moreland coal. It was, he declared, one of the best propositions he had ever seen.

It was no wonder that Henderson Goff was determined to get possession of it, he said.

Then they went to work.

By sundown two days later they had chosen the route for the narrow-gauge railroad and set stakes accordingly. Hayes told his general manager that with a good force of men the last rail could be put down within two months.

During those two days they had several times seen Henderson Goff in company with Black Adam Ball and some of his relatives. Once they had come upon Goff talking earnestly with Saul Littleford, the big, bearded, aunt brother of the Littleford chief. Hayes reminded Dale of this, and said to him further:

"Goff will have the Littlefords on his side the first thing you know! Maybe some of the Littlefords, as well as some of the Balls, knew about this coal before David Moreland got his mountain by State's grant at a few cents per acre. If you'll take my advice, Mr. Dale, you'll make friends of these two sets just as quick as you can."

Dale thrust his hand-axe inside his belt and turned to the mining expert.

"D'you know, I was thinking of that same thing when you spoke," he replied. "And I believe I can manage it, now that Miss Littleford's accidental wounding has given the old feud such a big blow. I'm fairly sure I can manage it so far as Ben Littleford is concerned; as for John Littleford that's going to be hard to bring to law. He should be home this evening, if he's had good luck, and I'll tackle him as soon as he comes."

"Well, we'd better be going, Hayes. There's six

miles before us, and it isn't long before night, and the trail is as crooked as a snake's track."

Together they started across David Moreland's Mountain, walking rapidly, with Dale leading.

Darkness came down on them when they had covered half the distance. The great hemlocks and poplars loomed spectral and gaunt in the early starlight. The almost impenetrable thickets of laurel and ivy whispered uncanny things, and their seas of pink and snowy bloom looked somehow ghostly. Now and then there was the pattering of some little animal's feet on the dry, dead leaves of bygone years. A solitary brown owl poured out its heart in weird and melancholy cries to the night it loved. There was the faint, faroff bay-ing of a hound, and the soft swish of a nighthawk's wings.

Men from the core of civilization must feel these things of the wilderness. . . .

Suddenly Dale drew back and stood still. In the trail ahead, standing as motionless as the trees about him, was the tall figure of a man. It was almost as though he were there to bar the way.

The two went on slowly. The figure didn't move. Dale spoke, and the form came to life. It was By Heck; he was leaning on the muzzle of his rifle.

"It's you, is it, Bill, old boy?" He yawned sluggishly. "I was a-waitin' here fo' you. I reckon I must ha' went to sleep a-standin' here on my feet! I've got news, Bill."

"Out with it."

"I've been a-trailin' Henderson Goff all day," Heck

said in guarded tones. "He's shore got them lowdown Balls to believin' they're already millionhairs."

"I knew that," said Dale. "That's not news."

"But that ain't all," By Heck went on. "Goff's got Saul Littleford, too—lock, stock, bar'l, and sights. He owns Saul jest the same as I own my old spotted 'coondawg Dime. Saul he gits him a job a-bein' mine boss, and what other Littlefords 'at will stick gits jobs a-diggin' the black di'mont at two dollars a day. Asides, all of 'em is to have a big lot o' money when the dividin'-up time comes, says Goff."

"Much obliged to you, By," Dale acknowledged. "Let's go; 'bout face, By! I'm going to tie a hard knot in that villainous game of Henderson Goff's."

They reached John Moreland's cabin less than an hour later. Moreland and his son had just returned from Cartersville, and Dale learned through Hayes that the two hillmen had shown good judgment and some business sense in making their purchases.

When the evening meal was over, Dale drew John Moreland out to the cabin yard, where the many old-fashioned flowers made the night air sweet with their blended odours. For a moment Dale stood looking toward the very bright stars and thinking; then he told the big man at his side of Goff's plan concerning the Littlefords, and strongly urged the making of friendship between the two clans.

"The snake!" mumbled John Moreland.

He appeared to be worried about it. He folded his arms, walked to the gate and back to Dale without uttering another word. It was hard for him to throw down completely the hatred of years upon years. Had

it been any other person than Bill Dale, a fighter after his own heart, who had asked it, he never would have even considered it; he would have said quickly:

"We'll thrash the Balls and the Littlefords, too!"

The younger man read something of the other's thoughts.

"With the help of the law," said he, "we might whip them all. But it would mean a great deal of bloodshed at best. The Littlefords are Babe's people, y'know. I like Babe. You like her, too, or you never would have gone with her to the hospital—now don't you?"

"I reckon I cain't deny," the Moreland leader muttered, "'at I like Babe Littleford. She ain't like none o' the rest of 'em, Bill."

Dale went on:

"All there is to do to enlist the Littlefords on our side is this: you go to old Ben and say to him: 'Let's begin anew; let's be friends, your people and my people, you and me.' He'll be glad you did it. Then it will be easy sailing for us. The Balls never would dare to attack such a force as the Morelands and the Littlefords combined. Don't you see? I admit it will be something of a sacrifice on your part. But a man like you can make sacrifices. Any man who is big enough to go down on his knees and ask the blessing of the Almighty on his enemies is big enough to make sacrifice. Come—let's go over and see Ben Littleford now; won't you?"

The mountaineer didn't answer.

"You won't throttle the cause born in David Moreland's good heart on account of a little personal pride—I know you won't!" Dale said earnestly.

Moreland straightened.

"You mean well," he said slowly. "I think you're one o' the very best men in the world, Bill Dale. You often make me think o' pore David hisself. But I'm afeard ye don't quite onderstand, Bill. I've seed my own son die from a Littleford's bullet. To go and offer to be friends with a man who might be the same one 'at killed my boy is a pow'ful hard thing to do. I'm afeard ye don't quite onderstand."

"It was a terrible thing, I know," said Dale. "But it was the fortunes of war. The Littlefords have endured the fortunes of war in exactly the same way. Come with me; let's go. I need your help; I can do very little without your help. Come, John Moreland!"

The hillman replied slowly: "Well, I'll go with ye over thar. But Ben he'll haf to make the fust break at a-bein' friends, 'cause I'm purty shore I never will. As soon as I git my hat, Bill."

He went to the front porch and took from a chair-post his broad-rimmed headgear. Then the two set out.

They crossed an ox-wagon road, a sweet-scented meadow, the river by means of the blown-down sycamore, another sweet-scented meadow and another ox-wagon road, and entered the cabin yard of the Littleford chief. Here too many old-fashioned flowers were in bloom; a cane fishingpole, slender and white, leaned against the porch; it made Dale think of Babe. . . .

"You wait out here," whispered Dale, with a hand on his companion's arm. "I'll go in and see if I can persuade Littleford to make the advance. I'm pretty sure I can."

He started forward when a hound rose from the stone

step and growled warningly. At that Dale halted and sang out:

"Hello, Ben!"

Immediately there was the sound of heavy footsteps on the cabin floor. The front door swung open, creaking on wooden hinges, and Babe's father, bareheaded and with a lamp in his hand, appeared in the doorway. He knew the voice that had summoned him.

"Come right in, Mr. Dale," he invited with the utmost cordiality. "Come right in!"

He scolded the dog away, and Dale entered the primitive home. Its interior, he noted, was a duplicate of the Moreland chief's home. He was shown into the best room, where he dropped easily into a roomy old rocker that was lined with an untanned sheepskin. Ben Littleford put the lamp on a crude table, drew up another chair, and sat down facing his visitor.

"I hope ye ain't jest happened over fo' a minute or two on business," he drawled; "I hope ye've come to spend the night wi' me, anyway."

"I'm here in the interests of peace," Dale began, looking at the hillman squarely. "I want you Littlefords to be on good terms with your neighbours, the Morelands. John is out there at your gate now: he is waiting for you to ask him in and say to him: 'Let's begin anew; let's be friends, your people and my people, you and me.' You want that, don't you, Ben? Babe did, I'm sure."

Littleford frowned, laced his big fingers together and twirled his big thumbs. Now that he was once more at home, with assurance that his daughter would entirely recover, he was no longer weak; he had all his old

courage and all his old, stubborn hill pride back.

"I'll ax John in," he finally decided, "but he'll haf to make the fust break at a-bein' friends. Me axin' him into my house is a purty durned good start towards friendship, ain't it?"

He arose, took up the lamp, walked to the front door and opened it, and called into the night:

"Won't ye come in, John?"

"I reckon I will, Ben," was the lazy answer. "Fo' a minute, anyhow. But I reckon I cain't stay long."

Moreland followed Littleford into the best room. Littleford put the lamp beside the worn leatherbound Bible on the table, and they sat down. They looked steadily at each other, and Dale saw plainly that both were ill at ease. Surely, thought Moreland, he had done a great deal when he had come into his old enemy's house. Surely, thought Littleford, he had done a great deal when he had asked John Moreland into his home.

Came a silence that was heavy. Each was depending upon the other to make the advance. The two clansmen stared at each other more and more sharply, and soon shadows of bitterness began to creep into their eyes.

Then Major Bradley, guest of Ben Littleford, strode into the room with a patrician and soldierly air, and he understood the situation perfectly.

"Gentlemen," he urged, "shake hands. Be friends."

They didn't. Neither seemed to have heard the major. It angered Bill Dale. His knowledge of these eudists, these grown-up children, was not yet very thorough. He went to his feet. John Moreland, too, rose.

"We'd as well go, hadn't we?" Dale clipped, and there was disgust in his voice.

"I reckon we had," agreed Moreland.

They walked out of the cabin, leaving Major Bradley and Ben Littleford gazing silently after them. At the gate Dale caught John Moreland's sleeve and halted him.

"Why on earth," he demanded, "didn't you make the break?"

"Bill Dale, I went into his house!"

Dale put his hands on one of the weatherbeaten gateposts and looked over to where a bright star burned like a beacon light above the pine-fringed crest of David Moreland's Mountain. He continued to look at the star, his face grey, until it glimmered.

Then he began to blame himself; he was the hope of a benighted people, and he had foolishly lost his temper at a crucial moment! He wondered whether it was yet too late, and turned his eyes toward his silent companion. He saw that John Moreland was looking toward the beacon star——

The voice of Ben Littleford came to them plainly because the night was so very still; he was reading from the Gospel according to Saint Mark, preparatory to his bedtime prayer. The two at the gate listened intently. The way in which the illiterate giant stumbled over the simplest words was pitiful. . . .

The hillman closed the Good Book and placed it on the table beside him. There was the low shuffling of feet as half a dozen persons knelt at their chairs. The prayer which followed was much like John Moreland's

own bedtime prayer; it had in it less of supplication than of thanksgiving.

And in the tail of it there were words that were like bullets to the mountaineer at the gate—

“—Bless the good man who is with us here to-night, and all o’ our kinfolks, and all o’ our friends, and all o’ our inemies—and *’specially the Morelands.* Aymen!”

Dale’s hand came down hard on John Moreland’s shoulder.

“You told me he wouldn’t do it!”

The old clan leader hung his head, like a man suddenly broken. He replied not a word; he seemed amazed into speechlessness. He had been wrong in his estimate of Ben Littleford; he had lied about a man who had just asked the good Almighty to bless him. John Moreland choked a little and started toward the cabin. He walked as though half blind across the porch, and entered without knocking, and went in to Ben Littleford with his right hand outstretched.

“Le’s begin anew,” he said huskily. “Le’s be friends, yore people and my people, you and me!”

Littleford arose and groped for his old-time enemy’s hand, found it and grasped it in both his own.

“You’re better ’an I am, John Moreland,” he said—
“you’re a damned sight better ’an I am.”

When Dale left them, they were talking over a great bear-hunt that they had taken together a score of years before.

The moon, full and as bright as new gold, had risen just under the beacon star when Bill Dale reached the doorstep of the cabin that was home to him. He faced

about. The broad green valley lay very serene and beautiful there in the mellow light. There was sound save for the gentle murmuring of the river.

"You wonderful place," he said softly, then added
"My own country!"

CHAPTER XII

THE BARBARIAN PRINCESS GOES HOME

MISS ELIZABETH LITTLEFORD beheld an interesting sight when she alighted from a northbound afternoon train at the Halfway. Just below the long siding a shorter siding had put in—the railway company had been hastened, albeit, by the great influence of old Newton Wheatland from it had been unloaded a small geared motive, a dozen or so of little coal cars opening at bottom, and miles of light steel rails with kegs for them.

Toward her home a crew of men worked like at the building of a trestle of round timbers that had been cut from the nearby woods; she at once recognized these men as Morelands *and* Littlefords, and she felt it meant peace! They didn't recognize her, because of the distance and the clothing she wore, and because they were too busy to pay any particular attention to her.

Further out toward Doe River another crew of men was at work clearing the way for the little narrow-gauge. She heard the sounds of the axe and the saw, the hammer and the steel, and once there came to her the great, dull roar of exploding dynamite as a trestle was blown clear of its foundations.

Miss Elizabeth Littleford smiled happily. And she had not been happy for a long time. Patricia McLaurin, with whom she had been staying, had been kindness itself, but the mother of Bill Dale, *her* Bill Dale, had *snubbed* her—and besides the longing for the old home hills was riotous in her blood. So she had come back, run away at less than a moment's notice—as had Bill Dale before her, and *how* good it seemed to be at home! She would have gone to see the men, had it not been that she feared she would be a bother.

There was another interesting sight when she had reached the crest of David Moreland's Mountain. In the upper end of the broad valley, midway between the "settlement" and the opening of the Moreland coal vein, two large buildings were well along in their course of construction.

She put down her bundle of clothing, shaded her eyes with her hand, and tried to find Bill Dale among the builders. But the distance was too great; a man down there was but a mere speck. . . . Before she went on, she removed her shoes and stockings. It was hard for Babe Littleford to become accustomed to wearing useless shoes and stockings in warm weather!

When she had reached the foot of the mountain, she didn't take the bypath her people had been wont to use in order that they might avoid contact with the Morelands. There was no need of avoiding contact with the Morelands now, thank goodness!

Then a voice hailed her from the laurels out at her right, the voice she loved better than any other—

"Hello, Miss Littleford!"

Babe stopped and faced him, and she blushed fur-

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ously when she saw him. He was coming rapidly toward her with his hat in his hand, and his brown hair was rumpled and damp with perspiration. She saw that he was in boots and corduroys, the clothing of a timber-jack, and he looked bigger in them; about his waist there was a cartridge-belt, from which hung a big and dependable-looking revolver in a leathern holster.

"Hello, Mister Dale!" she mimicked.

He shook her hand, then he dropped to a moss-covered log that lay beside the narrow trail.

"Sit down here beside me," he said; and he added: "I've been going hard all day, and I'm pretty tired."

She let fall her bundle and her shoes and stockings, and obeyed.

"Why did you come back, Babe?" he asked as though he were displeased.

"'Cause," she answered—and she corrected herself quickly, "I mean *because*."

"No reason whatever," smiled Dale.

"Well," and her clear brown eyes looked at him squarely, "I come back *because* yore mother she said I would be a burden to Mis' McLaurin, that's why."

"*Mrs.* McLaurin," said Dale; "not Mis' McLaurin."

"A burden to *Mrs.* McLaurin, and I ain't a-goin' to be a burden to nobody!" vehemently. In a softer voice, she went on, "Mrs. McLaurin and her husband and her folks has done made up friendly, Bill Dale. Mrs. McLaurin's pap—I mean her *father*—he brung 'em a big lot o' silver things. * * *

"Bill Dale, I had a big time! Everybody liked me but yore own maw—I mean yore *mother*. My goodness gracious!—they dress awful fine, don't they? Why,

silk ain't nothin'. But whar all o' their money comes from, I shore cain't see. Say, I showed some o' Pat's friends how to dance our old hill dances, and the whole town was crazy about 'em when I left. Jimmy Fayne is awful good-lookin' and rich, ain't he, Bill? He liked me better'n any of 'em, 'less it was Pat herself. You know Jimmy, don't ye, Bill?"

Dale nodded, frowned, and turned his sober gaze toward the toes of his high laced boots. Yes, he knew Jimmy Fayne, and he held him in contempt. The pampered son of a wealthy cotton speculator, weak, devoted to high nights, remarkably handsome to romantic and unsophisticated girls but not to men and women who had cut their wisdom-teeth—that was Jimmy Fayne.

Babe Littleford was speaking again:

"I 'cided to come back here, Bill Dale, because I thought they might need me here as well as because I was afeard I would be a burden to Pat—I mean *afraid* I would be a burden to Pat. Seems like I cain't talk proper at all! I've tried and tried. I've spent half o' my time jest a-tryin' to talk proper. Pat, she'd put down words I mustn't say on a sheet o' paper, and I'd study 'em. Afeard, shore, pap, 'cause, ain't, hain't—and all o' them. And she'd put down the right words with 'em, so's I'd know.

"Yore mother was the last to come to see me, Bill. 'So this,' she says to Pat, 'is the "Barbarian Princess!"' I didn't know what that meant, but I 'spect it's some-thin' bad. I went into the house, because I didn't want to say anything, and her yore own mother. But I listened, and I heard her say the rest, and this is it:

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"What will you do when the in-in-innovation wears off, Patricia?" she says. "She'll be a burden to you, Patricia; you'll have a half-savage person tagging after you, like a lady bear!"

"That's what it was she said, Bill Dale. . . . I'm shore they do need me here, and I ax ye this, Bill Dale: are *you* sorry to see me come back?"

"Perhaps they do need you." Dale slowly stripped the tiny leaves from a fern. "But that is not sufficient reason to warrant your staying here. Of course, I'm not sorry to see you, Babe. But you must go back to Patricia very soon. If you had been a burden to Patricia, she would have told you."

Babe put out a foot and idly rolled an acorn across the path with one bare big toe.

"But I—I don't think I want to go back," she protested. "I'd rather stay here, a heap rather."

"But you must go back," declared Dale. "You really must."

Ben Littleford's daughter was silent. For a moment she absently watched the playful antics of a little boomer squirrel on the side of a nearby hickory. Then she arose.

"Look," she urged—it was one of the charming wiles of her—"Look at my new dress. Me and Pat made it, every stitch of it. Don't you think it's nice?"

"Sure, it's nice," Dale agreed. "But any dress looks nice on you, Babe. If only you'd stick with Mrs. McLaurin and let her educate you! You shouldn't have cared anything about what my mother said; my mother doesn't always see things in the true light. You'll go back, won't you?"

She bent toward him and asked pointedly:

"Bill Dale, what makes you so anxious fo' me to go?"

"Because," readily, "I want you to have an education."

"What makes you want me to have a education, Bill Dale?"

"Because you'd be such a splendid woman, if you had an education."

Babe Littleford pursued with childlike eagerness: "And what makes *you* want me to be such a s-splendid woman?"

Dale lifted his grey eyes and answered her frankly:

"Because I expect to marry you some day."

Babe Littleford blushed deeply. Her eyes were glad, filled with rejoicing. If he didn't love her now, at least just a weeny-teeny bit, he wouldn't be thinking of marrying her some day, certainly, and this conclusion made her happier than she had ever been in all her life before. She wished wildly that she could hug him with all her might—and she had a big notion to do it. But what would he think of her?

Well, there would come a day when she would surely hug him with all her might. She would simply break his blessed bones, almost.

"Will you go to Patricia to-morrow?" he asked.

She really believed that she ought to go. But the thought of leaving him was more hateful than ever, now that she knew he meant to marry her. She strove to change the subject——

"See that little, teeny flower over there—that little, teeny, blue one?" she asked, pointing. "That's a day-

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flower. It's the purest blue of any. They call it a dayflower because it don't last but jest one single day." And again, pointing: "See that little, teeny, purple flower over there at them twisted laurels? That's called Job's tears, and they don't last but one day, neither. That little red, spidery thing is bee balm. Over yander at the hick'ry is monkshood. I l'arned the names out o' a book Major Bradley loant me. Hadn't we better be a-goin' toward home? It—it'll be a-comin' dark purty soon, won't it?"

Said Dale, "Will you go back to Patricia to-morrow?"

"I—I've been a-wonderin'," murmured Babe. "Which is proper, Bill, bust or burst?"

Dale spoke quickly. "Burst for you, bust for me. Will you go back to Patricia?"

Beaten, Babe Littleford drew a long breath and smiled.

"Yes, Mister Dale," she answered resignedly. "I will. I'll go whar—*where* you want me to go, ef—if it's to Torment. Now tell me how it comes that I find my people and their inemies as thick as m'lasses in a jug, while we walk on."

CHAPTER XIII

UNDER ARREST

WHEN Dale returned to John Moreland's cabin from having seen Babe Littleford safely to her father's door, he found Major Bradley and By Heck waiting at the gate. Heck had some important, bad news, he said.

"Better not tell me about it until after supper," replied Dale. "I'm as hungry as you ever were, By."

They went in to sit down to one of the best meals Addie Moreland had ever prepared. When they had finished eating, John Moreland led the way into the best room, where they took chairs. The major produced cigars. By Heck, swollen with a feeling of greatness, lighted the wrong end of his weed, faced Dale, and began to unburden his mind of its weight of information.

"Well, Bill, old boy," he began—and then stopped to wonder why his cigar wouldn't smoke as well as the major's. "Well, Bill, old boy," he went on, finally, "Henderson Goff, he's shore been as busy as a one-armed man in a bumblebee's nest. I cain't see, igod, what's wrong with this here seegyar. He's went and brung about twenty-five Torreys from two places knowed as Jerus'lem Cove and Hatton's Hell, to help work his mine when he gits it. They're all a-puttin'

up with them Balls. The Torreys is part Injun, Cherokee Injun, and I've heered it said 'at they was as bad or wuss'n rattlesnake broth."

Major Bradley blew a little cloud of smoke upward. "More of the game of bluff, perhaps," he suggested.

"I'm inclined to think so," thoughtfully said Dale. "We've been working like wildfire for two weeks, and we haven't been molested in any way. Well, we'll avoid trouble as long as we decently can; and when we can no longer get around it, we'll call in as much of the law as we can get, and meet it half-way. Eh, Hayes?"

"Sure," nodded the mining expert.

Dale was on his way to the new siding the following morning, when he met Henderson Goff. Again Dale was forcibly reminded of stories he had heard and read of Mississippi River steamboat gamblers of the long ago. Goff stepped out of the trail, smiled and spoke with apparent good humour. Dale passed him without a word.

Then the syster coal man called out, "Ready to sell yet?"

The Moreland Coal Company's general manager halted and faced about with a puckering of his brows.

"For a fair price, yes."

"Just what would you call a fair price?"

"Oh, somewhere between two and three hundred thousand," promptly.

Goff sniffed, and the corners of his mouth came down.

"You don't want much. You won't get it from me!"

"I don't want it from you."

Dale turned and went on. He was sorry that he had stopped to talk with the fellow.

That afternoon he again met Goff in the trail. The bare sight of the shyster made him very angry now, and his right hand fell upon the butt of the big revolver on his hip. Goff was about to sidestep in the laurels, when Dale caught him roughly by the arm.

"See here," he said sharply, "you've about cut your little swath. We've had enough of you. You can't get this coal at any price, and the sooner you get yourself out of this country the better and safer it will be for you. To be plain, I'm pretty apt to thrash you the very next time I see you. Now move on!"

Goff went off laughing wickedly. "Oh, all right, Dale; go ahead and build the little road for me!" he said.

Late that night every sleeper in the valley of the Doe was awakened by a great, rumbling explosion, which was followed almost immediately by another great, rumbling explosion. Before the reverberations had died away, Bill Dale had dressed himself and was standing on the vine-hung front porch, and he was only a few seconds ahead of John Moreland.

Then there came the tearing sound of a heavy explosion miles to the eastward.

"Do ye know what it is?" inquired the mountaineer.

"They've stolen our dynamite from the tobacco-barn, and blown up the office and supplies building and the commissary building; also they've blown up the big trestle near the siding," Dale answered.

"'At's my guess, too," said Moreland.

Within the next half hour Dale and Hayes, Major Bradley, and the menfolk of the Morelands and the Littlefords had gathered around the wreck of the two

big, unfinished frame buildings that Babe had seen from the crest of David Moreland's Mountain. Dale blamed himself much for having left the dynamite unguarded in the tobacco-barn—but nobody else blamed him for it.

"It's time to let the law in," he said when he had viewed the jumbled mass of broken planks and timbers by the light of lanterns. He turned to stalwart Luke Moreland.

"You get on my horse and ride to Cartersville for the sheriff. Tell him he can get the best posse in the world right here, if he needs one. It's the proper thing, isn't it, major?"

"Yes," said Major Bradley, "it's the proper thing. You've got a real grievance now. But I fancy Goff had nothing to do with this; he is shrewd enough to know that a thing like this would cook his goose. Goff has been playing a bluff game all along, you know. Some Balls or some Torreys, perhaps a mixture of both, have done this without Goff's knowing anything about it beforehand, I'm pretty sure. I'd have Sheriff Flowers arrest several of the Balls and several of the Torreys, and try to scare them into turning State's evidence to save themselves."

The major finished in a low tone, because of the probability for eavesdroppers, and in this he was wise.

"We'll do that," Dale decided.

He faced Hayes, his right-hand man, and began to give orders like a veteran general manager. The men were to take their rifles with them to work in the morning, but they were to fire no shot unless it was in defence of life or property. In the morning every avail-

able wagon in the valley was to be sent to the little sawmill that was in operation ten miles toward the lowland for more building material.

By Heck joined them then. He guessed just what had happened, plucked at Dale's sleeve and whispered:

"Sposen I takes a sneak or two towards them low-down, walnut-eyed, knock-kneed, dadblamed Balls and Torreys and finds out what I can find out; hey, Bill?"

The answer came readily: "Sure, you be detective. But be careful that you don't lose anything for us, y'know, if you don't gain anything."

By Heck and his rifle disappeared in the darkness of the mountain night.

A little after work-time that day, Bill Dale started alone on the way of the narrow-guage railroad for the siding. He wished to see for himself just what the damage had been to the trestle, and he hoped to meet Goff, or a Ball, or a Torrey, and learn something that would be to his advantage.

Before he had covered two miles, he had seen two of the enemy skulking through the woods, and he recognized them for Torreys from Jerusalem Cove and Hatton's Hell; he knew it by their very swarthy skin, their high cheekbones and their coarse black hair, the outcroppings of the Cherokee Indian blood in them. They looked cunning and wicked. Dale loosened in its holster the big revolver that Major Bradley had persuaded him to carry for his own protection. John Moreland had taught him how to use firearms.

At a point near where the little stream that flowed past the Halfway Switch emptied into Doe River, where Doe River turned almost squarely to the left, Dale

halted abruptly. He had seen a man dart behind a scrubby oak some thirty yards ahead of him; quite naturally, he concluded that the fellow meant to waylay him, and he, too, stepped behind a tree, a big hemlock.

A silent minute went by. Then Dale put his hat out on one side of the tree and peeped from the other side; it was an old trick that Grandpap Moreland had told him about. A rifle cracked promptly and sharply, and a bullethole appeared in the rim of his hat!

Following it, there came the coarse, bass voice of Black Adam Ball, the mountaineer Goliath:

"You cain't fool me. I jest shot to put a hole in yore new hat and to show ye 'at I ain't no bad shot. You cain't hit my hat!"

Dale's temper, the temper that had always been so hard to keep under control, rose quickly. He tried to reason with himself, and couldn't; his passion mastered him. He snatched the big revolver from its holster and cocked it. With as steady a hand as ever held a weapon trained, he began to take aim at Ball's slouch hat, the half of which was in plain view at one side of the scrubby oak.

"I fooled you once, back there in the middle of the river," he cried hotly, "and now I'm going to fool you again!"

There was in his voice that old, old primitive rage, which frightened him, and puzzled him too, in his better moments.

He let down the bead until it was barely visible in the notch, and eased off the trigger. The revolver roared and spat forth a tiny tongue of flame and a

little cloud of white smoke. Ball sprang erect, wheeled, and fell crashing to the leaves!

Dale dropped his weapon. He went as white as death, and his two hands clutched uncertainly at his throat. He was a murderer! No, he wasn't—his bullet had gone wild; it had struck Ball's head on the other side of the tree, by accident. But how could he *prove* that it had been an accident? Would any jury believe him? It was far from probable.

He stepped from behind the hemlock and went toward the writhing Goliath, whose legs only were visible now.

Then a third shot rang out on the morning stillness. It had been fired from a point some little distance away, and Dale's condition of mind at the moment was such that he didn't even note the direction from which the sound had come. He was unhurt, and he had not heard the whine of a bullet or the pattering of shot on the leaves. When he looked about him, he saw no one; neither did he see any telltale smoke. Perhaps, he thought dimly, it had been a squirrel-hunter that had fired that shot. He forgot about it very quickly for the time being, and went on toward Adam Ball, who now was lying perfectly still.

There was a bullet-hole through and through the great, shaggy head. The face behind the short, curly black beard was of the colourless hue of soapstone. The giant hillman was dead.

Bill Dale knelt there beside Black Adam. Again he clutched at his throat with his two shaking hands, and this time he tore his blue flannel shirt. All the agony and all the remorse in the universe seemed to be gather-

ing there in his heart. Never before had he seen death. It's grim presence terrified him. That the deplorable thing had been an accident, due to his faulty marksmanship, mattered little. He had killed a man, and the blood-red brand of Cain was burning away on his brow; he was a man in a hell of his own making. And kneeling there Bill Dale sobbed a great sob that shook his broad shoulders as a violent ague would have shaken them.

He tried to look at the blue-edged hole in the shaggy head; at the cruel, brutish face that was of the colourless hue of soapstone. Merciful tears blinded him, and he couldn't see. It was a compensation, a pitifully beautiful compensation. . . .

Five minutes passed, five minutes that were as five years to this man who had never been in the presence of death before. Then he realized that he was being surrounded by kinsmen of the dead mountaineer. He looked up into their ashen, angry faces, and they cursed him. Big and gripping brown hands were placed upon him; several rifles were turned upon him. He arose and spread out his arms, and offered his breast to the frowning muzzles. They could give him, at least, oblivion.

"Shoot, if you like," he said bitterly. "It was an accident, y'know, but—shoot, if you like."

"No," commanded Adam Ball's father, a slender and angular old man with a straggling iron-grey beard—"No, don't shoot. Shootin's too quick, by gonnies. And 'en, it ain't accordin' to law." (Queer how suddenly he respected the majesty of the law!) "We'd a durned sight ruther see him hung by the neck ontel

dead in the jailyard at Cartersville. Ye'uns put down them thar guns. Put down all o' them thar guns right now; hear me?"

He turned back to Dale. "Ye say it was a accident?" he sneered.

"Yes, it was an accident."

"Like the old devil!" roared Black Adam's father.

He stooped and picked up his son's black slouch hat and examined it. There were two bullet holes close together in the rim—and one of them had been there for a long time.

"John Moreland, he's been a-l'arnin' ye how to shoot," he said, "and you've shore l'arned purty damned well. It must ha' been yore third shot 'at got Adam."

"I fired only once," disagreed Dale. "Your son fired first; I fired second; and somebody else, I haven't the slightest idea who, fired the other shot."

"Aw, shet up! Ye can tell it at the trial," growled old Ball. Then to his kinsmen.

"We'll hold Dale right here, boys, ontel the shuriff he's sent atter comes. And we'll not move Adam, which same is accordin' to law. I reckon Shuriff Tom Flowers'll find a different job from what he expected to find; won't he, boys? Say, I wisht one o' you fellers'd gi' me a good, big chaw o' tobacker. Be durned ef I don't. Adam's death, it has made me feel sort o' bad, by gonnies, and tobacker's allus a consolation——

"Bill Dale, you hain't got a chaw o' tobacker on ye, have ye—bought tobacker, store tobacker? It's a durned sight better'n home-made, I says. Ye say ye don't *chew*! *Chew*—hell! Whyn't ye say - '*chaw*,'

like a man! I allus knowed ye wasn't no 'count, nohow. Nobody 'at don't chaw tobacker ain't no 'count. . . . All right, Jim Ike," to his nephew, "I'll take a chaw o' yores, then. And I'll take a tol'ably big chaw, Jim Ike, 'cause Adam's death has made me feel sort o' bad, and tobacker's allus a consolation."

The sounds of the shooting had carried far, and it wasn't long until the scene of the tragedy was crowded with Balls and Torreys, Littlefords and Morelands. Major Bradley and Hayes, too, were there. Every man of them was armed; a very little thing might easily turn the place into a shambles. The major saw this, and he was afraid. He drew the leaders of the Morelands and the Littlefords aside, and finally prevailed upon them to do their utmost toward keeping peace until the coming of the sheriff.

At first John Moreland and Ben Littleford were for taking Bill Dale from the Balls and Torreys who guarded him, if they had to depopulate the whole Ball settlement, Jerusalem Cove and Hatton's Hell to accomplish it! Happily, the major's counsel prevailed.

Sheriff Tom Flowers was a tall and lithe, smooth-faced man. He arrived with Luke Moreland at noon, after hours of hard riding. He saw the high tension, and immediately steeled himself to handle the situation. After riding straight to the centre of the gathering and there halting his horse, he said evenly:

"In order that I may know who to arrest, I must know something of the circumstances. Only one man must speak at a time. No playing bad with me; and remember that, gentlemen. I'll certainly drop the fellow who starts playing hoss with me, if it's the last

move I make on earth. Now somebody gently use his powers of speech."

Major Bradley, more soldierlike than ever, went forward. He hadn't the opportunity of speaking privately with Dale, and he feared that Dale would say something damaging to his interests.

"As the attorney of Mr. Dale, who stands accused of killing Adam Ball," he said to the officer, "I beg leave to state that my client will do no talking at present."

Dale understood, and he did not open his mouth.

But old Ball had something to say, and he proceeded to say it:

"He killed my son, Adam," pointing to Dale, "in cold blood. Me and about a dozen o' my kin was on our way over to Long Ridge to look at a bee tree, when we heered three pistol shots. We was right up thar," pointing to the northward, "and we come a-runnin' over here to see, by gonnies, what was the matter. Well, by gonnies, we found Bill Dale thar down on his knees aside o' my son, Adam, who was as dead as hell or deader; and Bill Dale was a-sobbin' and a-sobbin' about it. And ef he never killed my son Adam, what was he a-sobbin' and a-sobbin' about, I ax you that? And my son Adam, he had a rifle, by gonnies, but he never shot none at all. He was with us up to a few minutes before, and he hadn't shot none all mornin'. Shuriff Flowers, I wisht ye'd gi' me a good, big chaw o' tobacker, by gonnies, 'cause my son Adam his death it has made me feel bad."

Major Bradley stopped caressing his well-kept grey imperial, walked over the dead man's rifle, picked it up and put its muzzle to his nose. He scented fresh

powder-smoke. Then he faced old Ball with a strange, hard glitter in his blue eyes.

"You are a liar, sir," he said with a peculiar politeness.

A stir ran quickly over the Balls and Torreys. Sheriff Flowers called out:

"Quiet, there!" and there was quiet. He continued: "Where is Mr. Dale's revolver?"

The Balls had it. They produced it. It had three empty chambers when it should have had but one!

"Pass it to me butt first," ordered the law's representative. He knew that many a man had been shot while taking a revolver barrel first, and he was taking no chances.

Old Ball obediently turned the weapon around.

"Say, sheriff," he chattered, "have ye plumb fo'got about me axin' ye fo' a chaw o' store-bought? By gones, Adam's death——"

Flowers raised a protesting hand and turned to Dale.

"I have heard through Luke Moreland," he said with more or less of feeling in his voice, "a good many things in your favour. I want you to know that I'm sorry to have to take you and place you in the Cartersville jail. To show you that I mean it, I'll spare you the irons and allow you to ride your own horse along beside me, as though you were not under arrest at all."

Dale had by this time worn the keen edge from his grief by means of his great will power. He bowed slightly to the officer and replied with grave courtesy:

"Believe me, sir," with the very faintest trace of a smile, "I am very much obliged to you."

Luke Moreland led up the sleek young bay that Bill

Dale had named Fox, and Dale swung himself ea into the saddle. He faced the sheriff.

"If you're ready to go, sir," he said, "I am."

Together they rode through the woodland tow the broad, green valley, with the Littlefords, the Mc lands, Major Bradley and Hayes following close behind them.

Up on the side of David Moreland's Mountain th had been a silent and unseen witness to the arrest Bill Dale. She was hidden behind a gnarled and twis clump of sheeplaurel, sitting on a patch of tiny, dain pure blue dayflowers—crushing in her hands the t purple blossoms that are known as Job's tears.

"Lord, what'll I do now?" she murmured.

It was a great and unanswerable question, and was a prayer, too.

"Lord, what'll I do now?" she repeated.

When Bill Dale had ridden out of her sight, i threw down the crushed flowers and flung herself pr trate, with her face close to the hemlock needles a the earth, and wept low and bitterly, and wept a wept——

"Lord, what'll I do now?"

CHAPTER XIV

BY HECK KEEPS A SECRET

WHEN Sheriff Tom Flowers and the others had been gone for half an hour, Elizabeth Littleford sat up in the silence. It was a great and heavy silence that hovered there over the north end of David Moreland's Mountain. There was not even the drumming of a yellowhammer, not even the saucy chattering of a boomer squirrel, not even the twittering of a bird. Not a leaf stirred anywhere. Everything seemed lifeless. It was almost as though she were the sole inhabitant of the world.

Then she thought: It was noontime, and the officer and his prisoner would doubtless halt at John Moreland's cabin for the noonday meal; and if she hastened she would get to see Bill Dale again.

So she ran like a doe through the green woodland, through the tangle of laurel and ivy and over the moss-covered stones, across a shoulder of David Moreland's Mountain. She was barefooted, and her dress was a simple garment of white-dotted blue calico, and her long brown hair flowed behind her like the hair of a young witch—because of the excitement of the morning, she had forgotten to give it its usual daily plaiting.

As she drew near to the Moreland leader's home, she saw Bill Dale and the sheriff walk out at the gateway

and mount their horses. Major Bradley came out, and he, too, mounted his horse; and she was glad that he was going along. There was a great crowd; all the Littlefords were there, and all the Morelands, and old Granny Heck, the fortune-teller. On every face Babe saw signs of sympathy and sorrow. Her eyes filled. She was so glad that they, too, loved him. It was worth going to jail to know that one was loved like that! Not that it didn't hurt to see him going to jail, of course. Jail and horror are words that mean the same to the mountain dweller.

She went on to tell him good-bye. She knew it would be hard, but she steeled herself; she would be a Littleford, and strong. He saw her coming, and he turned his bay horse and rode to meet her. She stopped and clasped her hands, with her arms down full length, and tried to smile at him.

"You promised me," he said gently, "that you'd go back to Patricia and finish your education."

"I keep my promises," was the quick reply, "jest like every other Littleford that ever lived kept their promises. I would ha' went back this morning', ef it hadn't ha' been——"

And there she broke off abruptly. After a silent moment, she continued sadly, half tearfully, "And yet—and yet—the's not a bit o' use in me a-goin' back now!"

"Why?" Dale was smiling, and she was glad to note that he did not appear to be grieving over his misfortune.

"'Cause the' ain't," simply.

"But you'll go?"

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"Yes," she said, "in the mornin' I'll go."

He bent toward her and held down his hand. "Good-bye, little girl. I hope it will come out all right, and I believe it will."

Babe slowly lifted her hand to his. Her eyes were downcast.

"Good-bye," she told him brokenly. "And I hope it will come out all right, too—God knows I do, Bill Dale."

Thus they parted. Dale rode back to the sheriff and Major Bradley, and a minute later the three of them started for the lowland and Cartersville jail.

When a bend in the dusty oxcart road had hidden them from her view, Elizabeth Littleford turned homeward. Her mother followed her.

The younger woman dropped to the stone step at the vine-hung front porch with the air of one who is very tired, plucked a full-blown marigold and began absently to tear its petals slowly apart. Mrs. Littleford looked out across the meadows, sighed, smoothed back her grey hair with both hands, and sat down beside her daughter.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Babe, honey," she finally said. Then she too plucked a marigold and began to tear its petals slowly apart. "Ef he killed Adam Ball, it was to save hisself. He's a good man, honey. I think he's about the best man I ever seed, Babe."

"No, he never killed Adam Ball to save hisself even," Babe replied. "He's a fighter, but he ain't no killer. Listen, mother, it might ha' been this away:

"He is ahind of a tree, and Adam is ahind of another tree. Adam shoots at his hat, and he shoots at

Adam's hat—which is the reg'lar way of a two-man fight, as you know. Well, suddently Adam he jumps up like he's been shot, and falls a-groanin' and a-twistin'. Bill Dale, a-thinkin' he's killed Adam, comes out from ahind of his tree. Havin' drawed Bill Dale out into the open by his trick, Adam gits ready to shoot and kill him. Jest as Adam is about to shoot, somebody else shoots and kills Adam and saves Bill Dale—mebbe the' ain't time fo' anything else. Now don't ye see? And don't it all sound natchel, mother?"

"I reckon it does," granted the old woman. "But who was it shot Black Adam?"

"Somebody who is a friend o' Bill Dale's," said Babe. "Somebody who was a-follerin' Bill with the idee o' pertectin' him ef he needed it. Somebody who knowed it was dangerous fo' him to go off by hisself in the woods that away. I've got it reasoned out jest like this. . . . And whoever it was 'at was friend enough to Bill Dale to kill a man to save him will be friend enough to own up when the proper time comes and keep Bill Dale from a-bein' hung. Whoever it was 'at done it is skeered bad now, but later on he'll shore tell it, ef it'll save Bill. You jest wait and see, mother.

"I hain't never fo'got," Babe went on, after a moment, "about Black Adam Ball a-tellin' me about a-workin' that same trick on a man over in Nawth Ca'liner—and he killed the man. The law never found it out. And ye see what Black Adam got. 'Who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword.' It's in the Good Book, mother, honey; and everything in the Good Book is God A'mighty's truth, as you know."

"Ef I was pinned down to guess who it was 'at done

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it," drawled Mrs. Littleford, "I'd guess it was By Heck. He was a plumb fool about Bill Dale. His maw she says he talks in his sleep about Bill Dale. He was allus a-follerin' him around like a dawg."

Babe pointed to the meadow. An aged and stooped and witchlike woman was limping slowly through the clover, coming toward them.

"Granny Heck," muttered Babe.

The neighborhood's newsbearer and fortune-teller limped on up to the cabin, and dropped to the stone step beside Ben Littleford's wife and daughter.

"La, la, la!" she panted, for the days were warm. "And hain't it jest turrible! I wisht I may die this minute ef I wouldn't might' nigh as soon see my own son go to jail! But 'en it'll all come out right yit, Babe. I seed it in the cyards, and I seed it in the cup. Babe, honeydumplin', he never no more killed Adam 'an I killed him myself. I tell ye, the's been some awful on-godly work done, somehow. I know Bill Dale, and the' shore hain't nary durned drap o' killer blood in him. Now thar was my Uncle Bill, him 'at could jump a nine-rail fence——"

Babe spoke suddenly to her mother, interrupting the garrulous old fortune-teller:

"I've got to go and wash and iron my new white dress. Acause—*because* I'm a-goin' back to Mrs. McLaurin, like I promised I'd go. I'm a-goin' in the mornin', on the fust train. Ye might as well inform pap to hatch up my railroad money, mother."

She promptly forgot all about the new white dress, broke off another fullblown marigold and began to

tear it to pieces, which fluttered unnoticed to her bare feet.

Just then By Heck stopped before the gate.

"Do ye want to go home along as I go, maw?" he asked.

The three women turned their eyes toward the lanky moonshiner. He was standing straighter than they had ever seen him standing before, and he held his repeater across one of his thin shoulders in a manner that was almost soldierly. There was a queer look in his black eyes and on his lean face, a look that seemed much at variance with his former easy-going air. It was as though he had just discovered a hitherto unknown depth to himself.

The truth was that he was carrying a secret that was great, and almost too much for him.

His aged mother rose with a rheumatic groan. "Looky here, By," she demanded, "what on earth's the matter of ye? Ha' ye done went and swallowed a rifle's ramrod, or a fishin' pole, that ye walk so cussed straight and look like a plumb dadblamed fool?"

"No, maw," grinned her son. "Nothin' like it. I'm jest hongry, that's all. My gosh, ef I don't feel hongry enough to eat a whole raw yaller dawg! And top it off with a couple o' baked housecats. Durn my eyes and blast my forrard. I wisht ye'd come and go home along as I go, maw, and git me some dinner."

"All right, By, all righty." To Mrs. Littleford, "Come down and bring yore knittin', and spend the day wi' me. Good luck to ye, Babe, honey, when ye go back to the city!"

When they were within a hundred yards of their

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cabin home beside the river, Granny Heck said to her son, whose mind seemed inordinately busy:

"Who d'ye reckon killed Black Adam, the hound dawg o' Torment, By, darlin'?"

"I'm a-lookin' fo' rain to-day," very quietly said By Heck.

"I axed ye, sonny boy," the witchlike old woman went on, "who did you reckon killed Black Adam?"

"The's rain in the air," as though he had not heard. "Ef it don't rain to-day, it'll shore rain to-night."

"Now looky here!" snapped Granny Heck. "I said who did you think killed Adam Ball?"

By Heck did not smile, nor did he frown. "Ef it lon't rain to-day nor to-night," he drawled, "it'll shore ain to-morrer. I tell ye, mother, the's rain in the air."

"By! By! Ye dadblamed idjit!" protested the old woman vehemently. "Now you answer me what it was I axed ye!"

Said Samuel Heck, unperturbed:

"Grandpap Moreland still has to take his old grey hat down off o' the front po'ch roof every mornin' of his life. Jim Littleford's wife's son's grandpap's son-in-law is named Jim Littleford. Abner Moreland's got a old speckled oxen 'at ain't got but one good eye. Isaac Littleford talks through his nose. Little Tom Moreland's pap's old 'coon dawg ketched a big, pore possum last night with one foot gone whar it had been mawed off in a trap. Babe Littleford's got to be the well-roarin'est, purtiest gyurl in the world. Bill Dale e said a man who'd say 'eyther' and 'neyther' in place 'eether' and 'neether' would part his hair in the mid-

dle and wear a bow on the back o' his hat and ribbon in his onderclo'es. Maw?"

"WHUT!"

"Le' me ax ye a question," with a mock solemnity that was ultra-ridiculous. "Please don't try to joke wi' me, yore pore hongry che-ild. Maw, hawnest to goodness, will ye tell me the truth?"

Hopeful, she bent toward him. "O' course, honey boy, I'll tell ye the truth. What is it, darlin'?"

He whispered it: "Maw, don't deceive me. What was my maiden name?"

Granny Heck became so angry that she trembled. To her, baffled curiosity was but little better than torture. She caught her son by an arm and shook him as hard as her poor strength would allow.

"I wisht I may drap dead right here in my tracks," she declared shrilly, "ef I git you a dadslatted bite to eat ontel you gi' me a sensible answer! Who, I said, dang it all, did you think it was killed Black Adam, the hound dawg o' puggatory?"

"Don't talk so infernal loud, mother," and By Heck smiled a pale smile. "I don't *think* who killed Black Adam: I *know* who killed Black Adam. But, igod, it needn't to worry Bill Dale none! Git this here, mother dear—whoever it was done it shore ain't a-goin' to let nary hair in Bill Dale's head suffer fo' it!"

One of old Granny Heck's bony fingers shot out toward her son like a weapon.

"It was you, By!" she accused. "It was you killed Black Adam Ball! But ye know dadblamed well 'at I won't never say nothin' about it. Not a durn to I keer fo' a lowdown Ball. Now own up to me, son, and

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'll bake ye some cawnbread with aigs and hawg-renderin's in it. Wasn't it you that done it?"

By Heck passed a hand caressingly and longingly cross his hungry stomach. Then he looked toward some fleecy white clouds that were sailing slowly, like ships of silver and pearl in a sunny cerulean sea, over the rugged crest of the majestic Big Pine.

"The's rain in the air," he drawled. "Ef it don't rain to-day, it'll rain to-night; and ef it don't rain to-night, it'll rain to-morrer. Yeuh; the's rain in the air, mother, as shore as dammit."

CHAPTER XV

JAILLED

CARTERSVILLE nestles close between the points of two outlying foothills, and it is a delightfully lazy and old-fashioned town. For the most part it is made up of gabled old brick houses, which have pretty settings of green lawn, roses, honeysuckles and trees. Even in the small business district, the streets are lined with trees. They have electric lights there, and water mains, a common school and a high school, a courthouse, a jail, and a theatre.

It was a little after nightfall when Dale and the other two men rode through the shaded streets. Dale noted that the people they met under the swinging lights spoke cordially and with marked courtesy to his companions. It was very evident that the officer and Major Bradley were in high standing in their home town.

Sheriff Tom Flowers drew in before a hitching-rack that stood in front of the courthouse, a great old wooden building with a clock in its tower.

"We'll dismount here," said he.

They did. The major took the rein of Dale's horse.

"I'll see that the animal is well cared for, sir," he said to Dale. "And as soon as I have seen to our horses, I'll be with you. I wish to talk matters over

with you. Suppose I bring supper for us both, eh?"

Dale thanked Bradley, and turned away with the officer. They walked a short block and entered a low, square building of brick and stone, of which the windows were small and high and barred with iron. Dale knew that it was the Cartersville jail, and his heart sank in spite of him. Just as death by violence had been entirely new to him, so also was this entirely new to him.

Flowers took a ring of heavy keys from the hand of the jailer, and led the way down a whitewashed corridor. It was not yet bedtime, and the other prisoners were still up; some of them were reading newspapers, others were trying to mend their clothing, still others were doing nothing. A few of them called out boldly and bade the new prisoner welcome—and each of these received a gruff order from the sheriff to keep quiet. Dale paid no attention whatever to his would-be tormentors.

At an iron door at the end of the corridor, the officer halted and faced about.

"If there could be such a thing as a comfortable cell here," he said in low and kindly tones, "it's this one." He went on earnestly: "Now I want you to believe me when I tell you that it is with real regret that I put you behind a door of iron. But if I didn't do it, somebody else would do it; and it's possible that I can be a little more decent about it than another officer would be."

"I realize all that, y'know," replied Dale, "and I'm very much obliged to you, sheriff."

Flowers unlocked the door, and Bill Dale walked in. Flowers locked the door and went away.

Dale began to inspect his quarters. To all appearances, they were at least clean. There was a narrow bed covered with a pair of gray blankets, a stool and a soapbox, and nothing more. The light in the corridor behind him made snaky black lines of bar-shadows on the brick partition walls and the outer wall of stone. Dale shuddered in spite of himself. He put up one hand and turned on a small light, which dissipated the uncanny shadows—and showed him a line from Dante's "Inferno" that to him seemed very miserable; some former occupant of that cell had written it with charcoal on the whitewashed outer wall.

Then Dale sat wearily down on the narrow bed, leaned his head upon his hands, and began to think.

He had always wanted difficulties to overcome, barriers to surmount, a work to do, a fight to fight for himself. In full measure he had found them every one. He did not doubt his ability to overcome the difficulties, surmount the barriers, do his work well and fight his fight as a good man fights, and win—if it were not for the charge of having shot and killed Black Adam Ball! It seemed to him now that *that* must end all that was worth while for him. For that was more than a difficulty, more than a barrier.

He firmly believed that it had been his bullet that had finished the earthly existence of the giant hillman. True, it had been an accident. But how was he to convince a jury that it had been an accident? Would the jury take his word for it? The jury would not, of course.

The mysterious third shot, that had come from a little distance—but he could not reasonably expect de-

liverance from that source. If only he had held down his abominable, savage temper; if only he had——

Major Bradley interrupted his unpleasant train of thought.

"No brooding there, my boy!"

Dale looked up. The old attorney, as neat in appearance as though he had not even seen a saddle that day, was standing just outside the hateful door of bars; he was fingering his well-kept moustaches delicately, smiling broadly, his blue eyes a-sparkle. Beside him stood a whiteclad negro boy with a big tray of steaming food on one hand and a pot of steaming coffee in the other.

The jailer came and unlocked the door; also he very considerably brought another stool and fresh water. The major entered the cell, and the negro followed.

An amused twinkle appeared in Dale's eyes as Bradley put the tray down on the soapbox. There was enough for five threshing-machine hands! The black boy was sent to the front door to wait.

"I thought you'd be as hungry as I am, and I'm as hungry as poor old By Heck ever was!" laughed the major, as he sat down and began to pour the coffee. "Riding always made me as hungry as a bear in April. Light right into it, Dale. There's nothing like a good steak, for any meal, when a fellow is half starved; eh, Dale? Try that one, won't you? I told Massengale I'd cause his beheadment if these steaks weren't perfect. Massengale," he added, "runs *the* hotel here, the Eureka Funeral Parlors, and the One-Price Clothing Emporium."

"I wonder," smiled Bill Dale, "what he does with his spare time?"

Bradley laughed, his eyes twinkling merrily. Dale found that he too was hungry, now that savoury odours had invaded his nostrils. A minute later, and he had pronounced his steak delicious.

"Massengale shall not suffer beheadment," said the major; and he began to carve his own steak.

It was an excellent meal, the grim surroundings notwithstanding. When it was over, the negro boy came and took away the dishes, and received with a glad-some grin the two silver coins that were given him. Then Bradley produced a handful of cigars, and two of them were promptly lighted.

"Now, sir," said the old lawyer, "I feel like talking. Let's see, you gave your man Hayes orders to carry the work right along as though nothing had happened, didn't you? And the sheriff is to go back the day after to-morrow to arrest two or three Balls and two or three Torreys, to see what he can find out concerning the dynamiting of the two buildings and the trestle—to-day was not a good time to make the arrests. Am I correct?"

"Correct," nodded Dale.

Bradley regarded his cigar thoughtfully.

"Now," he said in a low tone, suddenly lifting his gaze to the other's face, "tell me about the thing that brought you here. Don't omit even the slightest detail. Nobody can overhear you if you will hold your voice down. These walls are very thick, you see. Well, you may begin."

In carefully guarded tones, Bill Dale gave a straight-

forward account of the whole unfortunate occurrence. The major listened intently to every word of it, so intently that he allowed his cigar to go out. Often he stopped his client and asked him to repeat certain portions of the story in order that he might be doubly sure of a point. Dale's cigar, too, was black and cold long before he had finished.

As Major Bradley rose to ask the jailer to come and let him out, Dale muttered downheartedly:

"Tell me, major: what do you think of my case? It looks rather bad, doesn't it?"

"Not bad enough to warrant your feeling blue over it, my boy!" said Bradley, showing his polished white teeth in a smile that was meant to be reassuring. "I think we'll get you out of it. Anyway, don't worry about it. Worry will kill a cat, they say! You didn't kill Adam Ball. John Moreland had taught you how to shoot pretty well; and if you took even half as careful an aim as you think you did, you couldn't have missed Ball's hat by so much.

"I have an idea, Dale," he resumed, "that if we knew who fired that third shot we'd know who did for Ball. It might have been done in order to save you. Ball was noted, I understand, as an unfair and tricky fighter. He might have been trying to trick you when he rose and fell groaning. Perhaps he meant to draw you into the open, that he might have a clean shot at you. Eh?"

Dale shook his head gloomily.

"Hardly plausible, major. In that event there was nothing against the man whose bullet finished Ball, because he did it to save me; and he would have owned

to it and prevented my arrest. A man who liked me well enough to kill Ball to save my life would like me well enough to confess and save me from suffering for it. I am sure of that, major."

"Ah, my boy," smiled the older of the two, "you don't yet know the mountain heart. Jail is a terrible thing to the liberty-loving mountaineer. But love of you, and love of fair-dealing, will soon overcome the fear of jail, and you will be freed—if what I strongly suspect proves to be well founded. I'll leave you now, Dale. I'll see you in the morning, sir. Good-night!"

When his optimistic attorney had gone, Dale glanced once more at the to him miserable line from Dante's "Inferno," and began to remove his outer clothing preparatory to going to bed. He did not feel anything like so confident concerning the outcome of his trial as Major Bradley evidently felt. Then he became even more dejected, and he told himself that the major had spoken so reassuringly merely to help him keep up heart.

The night passed, and another bright summer day dawned, and in the Cartersville jail there was one prisoner who had not slept at all. Each of those long and heavy black hours had been an age to this prisoner to whom jail was so new.

At noon a furious windstorm, accompanied by much vivid lightning and blinding rain, sprang out of the west and began to sweep the countryside, and out of the lowering wet gloom there came one to deliver Bill Dale. He was a mountaineer, young and stalwart and strong, and about him there was much of that certain English fineness that was so striking in his father.

entered the low, square building of brick and
and stopped in the centre of the corridor, where
ood, while water ran from his wet clothing and
red in little pools at his feet, and looked to his
and to his left. Dale saw him, and cried out in
rise:

aleb!"

aleb Moreland walked straight, his head up and
oulders back, a splendid picture of virile young
ood, to the end of the corridor. He gripped two
e door's hated bars, bars that had long been worn
th by other human hands; he pressed his smoothly
n, sunburned face against the iron, and smiled.
ow are ye a-feelin' by this time, Bill? It's some
f a place, ain't it?"

le took a step toward him. "Well, a queen's
ir is nicer. What are you doing here, Cale?"
ve come to set you free," said Caleb Moreland.

le stared unbelievably. "But that is impossible,

How could you set me free?"

all Tom Flowers, and I'll sight ye."

om the door of his office, Sheriff Flowers had been
ly watching the mountaineer. Dale called, and
ficer came immediately. Caleb Moreland turned
the cell door and faced him.

ve come here to own up to the killin' o' Black
Ball," began the young hillman.

swallowed, went a trifle pale under his tan, and
nued bravely:

ill Dale thar, he never done it. I am the one 'at
it. Bill he shot at Adam, but he missed—Adam
lone shot at Bill fust, y'onderstand, Tom. But I

didn't miss. I don't never miss. I'm a plumb tomb-stone shot. They allus rules me out at any shootin' match. I'd ha' owned up to it yeste'day, but the thought o' jail had me skeered bad. I jest cain't let as good a man as Bill Dale thar suffer fo' a thing I done myself. So you let him out, Tom, and put the right man in thar."

Flowers had a good heart, and this touched it. But he was not very much surprised.

"Tell us about it, Caleb," he requested.

Caleb looked toward Dale, then he faced the lord of Cartersville's little prison again.

"Well, shuriff, when I seed Bill Dale go off toward the trustle by hisself and alone, I knowed right then he was in danger o' bein' laywayed by some o' them thar lowndown Balls and Cherokee Torreys. So I decides to foller attar him and gyard him, without him a-knowin' anything about it, which same I done. When he met Adam Ball——"

He broke off abruptly. There was a rather shrewd twinkle in his clear grey eyes.

"Go on," urged Flowers.

"I reckon I won't," smiled Caleb, and his eyes were still twinkling. "I reckon I won't do no more talkin' jest now. A man can awful easy talk his fool head off, ye see; pap allus said more men had been hung by their mouths 'an by any other way. Yes, I reckon the proper place fo' me to do my big talkin' is in the co'te-house at my trial. Lock me up, will ye, Tom?"

"We'll see," said Flowers.

Forthwith he despatched a deputy for Judge Carter and Major Bradley, who hastened to the jail.

An hour later Caleb Moreland was the occupant of the cell at the end of the whitewashed corridor, and Dale was mounting his bay horse Fox to ride back into the heart of the everlasting hills. The rain had gone as quickly as it had come, and the skies were once more blue and bright. Everywhere there was the lazy droning of wild bees and the sweet odour of honey-suckles. . . .

He arrived two hours after nightfall. The Morelands were glad to see him, and the Littlefords were glad to see him. There was rejoicing there in the broad valley that lies between David Moreland's Mountain and the Big Pine. Everybody had been expecting him, and many were the pairs of eyes that had been watching for him. He found himself suddenly wishing, with a tightening at his throat, that his father could know how much bigger and how much better it was to be thus esteemed than to be wealthy.

Luke took charge of his tired horse and led it away to the old log barn and to some fifteen ears of yellow corn. Luke's father escorted him proudly, the guest of honour, in to one of Addie Moreland's incomparable old-fashioned suppers, which was none the worse for being late. Several Littlefords sat at the long, home-made table.

John Moreland turned up the light a little, and cracked a worn but timely joke; then he looked toward one of the men whom he had fought throughout many years, and muttered into his thick brown beard:

"Saul, friend, will ye do us the favour o' axin' the blessin', ef ye please?"

"Shore, John, o' course."

Saul Littleford, the very illiterate, laced his big fingers together across his plate, bent his head, and told the good Almighty that they were all very much obliged to Him for the fine supper they had before them, for Addie Moreland who had cooked it, for peace, and for Bill Dale. . . .

It was almost midnight when the visitors left. They had been sitting outside, on the honeysuckle-scented front porch and in the cabin yard. At last Bill Dale and John Moreland were left together on the porch.

"There's a thing that has puzzled me since the moment I got here this evening," said Dale, after a little period of silence save for the faraway baying of a hound, the lonesome cry of an owl, and the gentle murmur of Doe River the beautiful. "Why is it that nobody seems to be grieving over Caleb's being in jail?"

The big hillman's answer came almost sharply: "No Moreland ever grieves over a sacrifice, Bill."

Dale sat up straight. "A sacrifice! What do you mean?"

This time the big hillman's answer came slowly. "I mean 'at Cale he's a-takin' all o' the load off o' yore shoulders 'at he can. Cale he's a-takin' yore place in jail ontel the trial comes off, which'll be at the October term o' co'te. He trusts you to come back and set him free on the day o' the trial. O' course you'll do it; we hain't never doubted that fo' one little minute, Bill. But it wasn't all done fo' yore sake. You're the hope o' the Morelands, and you can do a heap more here 'an Caleb can."

He leaned toward Bill Dale and went on in a confidential tone:

"And I can tell ye this here: ef you're found guilty o' killin' Adam Ball, and sentenced fo' even one year, the Morelands and the Littlefords is a-goin' to take ye from the officers and turn ye loose with a good, long start on the law."

"Wouldn't that be rather——"

Dale broke off because he had seen the tall figure of a man appear in the open gateway. It was By Heck, and he spoke.

"Hello, John Moreland!"

"Hello yeself!" growled Moreland, who was not at all pleased at the interruption.

Heck advanced, carrying his rifle by its muzzle. He halted with one foot on the stone step.

"I've got news fo' ye, Bill," he said, recognizing Dale even in the darkness. "I've been a-eavesdrappin' up at old Ball's house, and I had to choke about ten dawgs to death to do it. All o' my fingernails is tangled up wi' dawg-hair. Bill, old boy, them Balls has done swore by everything on earth and in Heaven and in Torment 'at they'll kill you ef the law don't. And them lowdown Cherokee Torreys is all with the Balls. Igod, ye'd better watch out, Bill."

John Moreland rose from his chair.

"Much obleeged to ye, By. And good-night to ye. Le's go into the house, Bill. I didn't think them damned polecats had that much narve—and I don't hardly believe it yit. It might ha' been white licker a-talkin'. Their kind o' white licker ain't hawnest, like By Heck's is, though his'n is bad enough. Their kind'll make a man resurrect his dead inemies out o' the graveyard and shoot 'em up all over ag'in. It

ain't a-goin' to do a great deal o' harm, Bill, ef don't light no lamp when ye go to bed. A man ca never tell jest what's a-goin' to happen."

"And the Ball-Torrey outfit——" Dale began, w the Moreland chief cut in:

"Ef the Ball-Torrey outfit pesters you, the every one purty durned apt to die with what is kno gen'ally in this section as the rifle-bullet disease."

CHAPTER XVI

SENTENCED TO HANG

SHERIFF TOM FLOWERS and four able deputies rode out of Cartersville very early on the following morning. They went to the Big Pine Mountain country, and, by a scheme that entailed some shrewdness on the part of the chief officer, arrested two Balls and two Torreys on suspicion and took them away without trouble.

The two Balls and the two Torreys were lodged in the Cartersville jail and offered their liberty and exoneration from all blame in the dynamiting affair if they would give the names of the other guilty parties and appear against them. The mountaineers declared stoutly that they knew nothing whatever of the matter, and when pressure was applied they grew sullen and refused to talk at all.

It was plain to Flowers that they did know something about it, and he finally ordered that they be kept in a cell on a diet of bread and water until their tongues loosened. At which the Balls and Torreys swore loudly and swore that they would rot in jail first—unless their kinsmen came and shot up the town and liberated them by force!

"To me that is proof that you four are guilty," grimly smiled the sheriff. "And if your folks want to

try storming the jail, let them. A full company of militia can be rushed here within an hour, at any time, and we'll give your folks all the fun they want."

It may be recorded that the four hillmen never confessed.

Bill Dale, closely shadowed by one lanky Samuel Heck with his inevitable, ever ready rifle, went among the workers with a cheer that he did not feel. For Caleb Moreland was in jail, and Caleb Moreland was innocent. But there was one sincere delight for Dale: Hayes was driving the little railroad ahead with all his might and all the might of his men. Hayes was in high favour with those under him; they worked even harder when he was absent than they worked when he was standing over them.

The days ran on, and there was no sign of a hostile demonstration from the Balls and Torreys. Judging from appearances, they were wholly satisfied with Caleb Moreland's being in jail.

Henderson Goff had disappeared. Dale hoped that he was rid of the man for all time, but he wasn't. Goff was not so confident as was Major Bradley that he could establish his innocence in the matter of the dynamiting of the two buildings and the trestle. He wished very much to steer clear of arrest, for reasons of his own, and he was biding his time in a little town in western North Carolina. When the dynamiting affair had blown over, he would go back and try again, perhaps by an altogether new scheme, to get himself into possession of the Moreland coal.

Then there came to the neighbourhood a man whom

no Moreland, and none of the Littlefords, had ever set eyes upon before. He was a very uncouth mountain man, with long black hair and shaggy beard; his clothing was outlandish and ragged. He had not much to say; there was about him, somehow, an air of mystery.

Two days after his arrival, in the afternoon, the stranger met Dale midway between the Halfway Switch and the opening of the coal vein, and stopped him with an upraised hand.

"Do you know good coal when ye see it?" he drawled.

"Why?" asked Dale, on his guard.

The stranger looked sharply in all directions, as though he wished to make sure that no person was within earshot of them. Evidently satisfied, he drew from a trousers pocket a shining black lump of coal, which he held out for Dale's inspection.

"What do ye think o' this here?" he wanted to know.

Dale took the lump and examined it closely. It was apparently as good as the Moreland coal, which had sent the expert Hayes into raptures. Dale then looked closely at the stranger. He appeared to be honest; his gaze was steady, and seemed very innocent.

"Where did you get this?" Dale asked.

The alert eyes narrowed. "Do ye think this here vein you're a-fixin' to mine is the only vein in the whole country?"

"Where did you get this?" Dale repeated.

"Do ye think," drawled the other, "'at I'm plumb fool enough to give my find away fo' nothin'? I been pore all o' my life, Mister!"

"How am I to know," frowned Dale, "that you've really got a find?"

"Ye'd believe yore own two eyes, wouldn't yet?"

"Yes," Dale agreed, "I'd believe my own two eyes, of course. What's your name, and where are you from?"

"What do I git outen it? I don't own the mountain it's in, but it shore can be bought fo' fifteen cents a acre. And nobody knows about it but jest me. It lays closer to the railroad 'an this here Moreland vein, too. What do I git outen it, Mister?"

The mountaineer seemed more honest than ever, but Dale was still on his guard. He asked again:

"What's your name, and where are you from?"

This time the answer came readily: "My name it's Walt Turner, and I'm from Turner's Laurel, Madison County, State o' Nawth Ca'liner. But my find it ain't nowhars clost to home. 'Tain't no more'n about two hours o' walkin' from right here, Mister. Ef you'd jest up and go along wi' me, I'd show it to ye."

Dale rubbed his smoothly shaven chin and considered. He was the last person in the world to throw away a big opportunity. There might be a considerable vein of this new coal. Even if he was sent to the State penitentiary for a term of years, Hayes was entirely capable of carrying on the mining operations.

"I'd like to take my mining man, Hayes——"

"No!" quickly objected Walt Turner. "I don't want nobody else to know whar it's at but jest you and me. That away, ye see, ef I'm treated crooked I'll know edzactly who done it—and I'll shore git you! But I heered tell 'at you was pow'ful square, Mister."

"Could I get back here before nightfall?"

Turner's eyes lighted. "Shore!"

"Then lead the way," ordered Dale.

Walt Turner, from Turner's Laurel, Madison County, State of North Carolina, crossed the little creek on stones and went straight to the northeast, missing the Ball settlement by a good mile, and hard on his heels followed the Moreland Coal Company's stalwart general manager.

The way was exceedingly rough. The two men climbed rugged cliffs, threaded dense thickets of great laurel, mountain laurel, sheep laurel, and huckleberry bushes. They were one hour in a stretch of woods where the hemlocks, poplars and hickories stood so thickly that the interlacing branches overhead shut out completely the light of the sun and half the light of day. Fearing a panther, or a wildcat, Dale kept his revolver loosened and ready in its holster. Walt Turner armed himself with a long staff—for snakes, he said; and then he proved it by killing a rattler that had eight rattles to its tail.

But they travelled rapidly, notwithstanding the fact that the going was difficult; and two hours after the beginning of the little journey Dale saw before him a small and almost circular, level-bottomed basin walled in by low cliffs. A small creek ran through this basin and made two easy ways of entrance. In the hollow they saw clumps of laurel and huckleberry bushes, and wild grasses knee-high; toward the centre stood a solitary big and gnarled black walnut tree.

They entered at the point at which the creek ran in, and went to the walnut tree. There Turner halted

and faced Bill Dale with a peculiar glint in his eyes. Dale was looking at the rugged walls of stone, and at the thick green forest that rose above them; he was marvelling, as only a true lover of beauty can marvel, at the wonderful grandeur of it all.

Walt Turner, of Turner's Laurel, opened his slit of a mouth and spake, "*Here's the kitty!*"

Dale was brought out of his enjoyment most rudely. From behind clumps of laurel and huckleberry bushes, from the tall grasses, from everywhere—it seemed from nowhere—there sprang dozens of Balls and Torreys with rifles in their hands! Bill Dale had walked, as gentle as a kitten, straight into a trap.

His right hand moved toward the butt of his revolver, then dropped at his side. It was foolish, worse than useless, to show fight; dozens of rifles were staring at him with their frowning, murderous eyes, and their bullets would riddle him if he showed fight. He glanced toward Walt Turner, kinsman of the Balls.

Turner was laughing openly. "Pore little kitty!"

"If ever I have the chance," muttered Bill Dale, "I'll thrash you for this cute little joke of yours."

"You won't never have the chanst," laughed Walt Turner.

The Balls and the Torreys began to close in on all sides, and a solid ring of dark and for the most part bearded, wickedly triumphant faces formed itself around Dale. Adam Ball's father, the acknowledged leader of that band of cutthroats that was now the Ball-Torrey faction, glared at Dale with black eyes that were filled with the fire of intense hatred; then he seized Dale's revolver and thrust it inside the waist-

band of his worn jeans trousers. Dale felt the grip of rough hands on his shoulders and arms. He fully realized his great danger; but he strove to keep all signs of fear out of his countenance, and he was not unsuccessful.

"I presume this is what you call taking the law into your own hands, isn't it?" he said with a smile that was forced.

"Edzactly!" snapped old Ball. "We ketched ye fo' the law, and we held ye fo' the law, and we turned ye over to the law; and 'en, by gonnies, the law turned ye loose the very next day! And 'en the shuriff he comes out here and arrests four o' us! Ef the law won't try ye and punish ye fo' a-shootin' my son Adam in cold blood, by gonnies, we'll try ye and punish ye fo' a-doin' it. But ye needn't to be skeered none at all. Ye're plumb shore to git jestice. I'll promise ye jestice."

"You've evidently overlooked the fact that another man confessed to the killing, and that that was why they liberated me," said Dale.

"It's some cussed frame-up," snarled the leader of the gang. "No man on earth don't like no other man well enough fo' that. Asides, you're the one 'at killed my son Adam, by gonnies, and you're the one 'at must suffer fo' it. Right here onder this here warnut tree we're a-goin' to hold co'te and have yore trial, by judge and jury, and you'll shore git what's a-comin'—"

Bill Dale cut in with some bitterness: "And you'll be the judge, and your plans have already been laid, and I'm to be hanged by the neck until dead; eh?"

Well, you'll pay dearly for it, I promise you. We always have to pay for what we get, you know. The Morelands and the Littlefords will be quick to settle the account. You know that."

"No," old Ball disagreed hotly, "and I don't know that!"

He turned to the others.

"Set down, boys. It's the same price as standin'. The jury will please set over thar," pointing to his right. "The pris'ner and his gyards will please set right over thar," pointing to his left. "The hon'rab'le jedge, which same is me, will please set right thar," indicating a spot at the base of the gnarled walnut. "The rest," he finished, "will set anywhar they damm pleases. Set down, men."

His orders were obeyed. Dale found himself sitting on the ground between two pairs of mountaineers and facing a line of twelve mountaineers—the so-called jury. To his left was the self-appointed judge, and to his right lounged a score or more of men whose attention was then being turned toward a jug of fiery new whisky that had never been near to a revenue stamp or anything else that was honest. The jug travelled rapidly from one hairy mouth to another.

Old Ball made a wry face, smacked his lips, passed the jug to a member of the "jury," and announced:

"Well, dammit, co'te's open now."

"Kitty, kitty, kitty!" taunted Walt Turner. "Pore little kitty!"

The mockery began. It was ridiculous, and yet it was grim. Adam Ball's father himself furnished most of the evidence; also he acted as prosecuting attorney.

Of course there was no counsel for the defence, and it wouldn't have helped if Dale had had a proverbial Philadelphia lawyer on the grounds; all the proof and eloquence and pleading in the world never would have changed, in the slightest degree, the sentence that had been cut and dried for Bill Dale. The mock trial was being held solely because the Balls and Torreys felt that by holding it they were insulting the majesty of the law and making their vengeance sweeter. It became worse than a travesty. . . .

Night fell during the wordy and profane harangue of the Ball leader, and it was ordered that a fire be built at once. At once a fire was built, dry brushwood being used, and in its red and flickering glare the faces of the hillmen looked doubly dark and doubly wicked. Then the judge begged a chew of tobacco and deliberately kept the whole twist, and told the jury to go out and bring back a verdict without loosing time.

The twelve mountaineers rose unsteadily and went to the creek, and there one of them uncovered another jug of fiery new whisky that was alien to a revenue stamp. They drank heavily and returned to the walnut tree court without mentioning the trial.

The foreman was a Torrey, and a particularly bad one. His swarthy face, with its high Cherokee cheekbones and its thin-lipped mouth, was ultra-cruel, ultra-vicious. He entered the circle of red and flickering firelight slowly, smiling evilly, and the other eleven crowded up close behind him. He cleared his throat, spat between two fingers at the fire, and turned to the judge.

"Gentlemen o' the jury," growled the ruling Ball, "have ye reached a verdict?"

"We have, yore honour," very promptly answered the Torrey who was foreman. "And we ha' found the pris'ner guilty o' the wust kind o' coldblooded, premeditated mudder in the fust degree, yore honour."

Old Ball levelled a knotty forefinger toward Bill Dale.

"Fo' the killin' o' my son Adam," he pronounced sentence, "you sh'll hang by the neck ontel dead, from a limb o' this here warnut tree, by gonnies, at sunrise in the mornin'."

Although he had well known what the sentence would be, Dale went suddenly ashen. Then he took a firm grip on himself and began to reason.

He could not hope, he decided, that the Morelands and the Littlefords would find him before the sun rose. They would miss him, of course, and they would suspect foul play and look for him; but finding him in that wilderness—it was impossible. It became plain to him that he would have to save himself if he were saved. He believed his best chance lay in his proving that he was anything but a coward; the worst mountaineer, he knew, admired a brave man.

So he turned slightly toward the self-appointed judge and asked calmly:

"Is there anything really game about you?"

"Shore, by gonnies!" quickly. "I'm all game. I'm the feller 'at showed wildcats how to fight. What about it?"

"I'll see if you're all game," Dale said, and he smiled when he spoke. "I'll make you this proposition: I'll

fight any ten of you, two at a time, with five minutes' rest between fights; if I whip them all I go free, and if I don't whip them all I hang immediately. All parties to be barehanded, no guns and no knives. Are you that game?"

Ordinarily, it would have been a thing wellnigh impossible to do, much as Dale knew of the pugilistic art, great as was his strength and endurance. But now most of those about Dale were drunk and therefore weakened, and he believed he had a chance if old Ball accepted.

But Judge Ball didn't accept. Doubtless he remembered his son Adam's fight with Dale.

"The' cain't be no fightin' in co'te," he said. "You sh'll hang by the neck ontel dead, at sunrise in the mornin'."

There was a mumble of approval from the others. Doubtless they, too, remembered that the young man whom they held a captive had once whipped Black Adam Ball, the mountaineer Goliath, with his bare hands. They did not have the one good trait that Dale had hoped they possessed; while they must have admired him for his courage, they were afraid to fight him without weapons. Dale recalled the fact that the Balls were not originally hillfolk, but lowlanders who had taken to the mountains in order to avoid being forced to fight during the Civil War, a people without a principle. The Cherokee Torreys, of course, were even worse.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty!" Walt Turner called tauntingly again. "He walked into the trap like a pore little kitty!"

A ploughline of half-inch cotton rope was produced, and the condemned man was securely bound, standing on his feet and facing outward, to the big walnut. Desperate as was his case, Dale couldn't help being a trifle amused at that part of it. It was so very melodramatic. And yet, it was so grimly real, and his hopes seemed so thin. . . .

The Morelands and the Littlefords would eventually learn the truth and make the Balls and Torreys pay a dear price, no doubt, but that—that wouldn't give him back his life!

The men were divided into two watches. The first was to remain awake and on guard until midnight, and the other was to go on duty from midnight until dawn. The second watch, with which was the faction's leader, had a nightcap of the vitriolic whisky, flung itself sprawling on the ground, and straightway went to sleep.

The first watch sat around the crackling brushwood fire and played cards for chews of tobacco, cartridges, and pocket knives, sang strange and outlandish songs, and drank more whisky. One very drunk Torrey gambled away all his tobacco, all his cartridges, his knife, his rifle and his belt, his coat and his hat, his boots and his shirt—and offered to bet his trousers and his ears on the turn of a single card! It was funny, and it was disgusting, too. It was all the work of whisky, which Bill Dale had always hated because it made men fools, made them mouth their secrets and made them commit murder. . . .

After some two hours of these worse than bacchanalian orgies, the first watch, heavy with drink, stopped

playing cards and singing outlandish songs, forgot all orders, and began to nod. Then it was that Dale thought of the man who had been his faithful guardian for many days, the lanky By Heck. Why hadn't he thought of Heck before! He wondered if Heck had followed him to the trap, if Heck was near him even then, if Heck had gone for help. Soon his spirits had risen; he believed he had reason for hope.

By Heck had not followed Bill Dale to the little basin. But he had followed Henderson Goff, and Henderson Goff had followed Dale to the little basin. Goff had returned to the Big Pine Mountain country only that day, and he knew nothing of the plans of the Ball-Torrey faction until he witnessed the mockery of a trial. Goff was now crouching in the darkness on the low line of cliffs to the eastward from the walnut tree; and not far behind him, well hidden in the black laurels, watching him and watching Bill Dale, crouched By Heck.

Dale's guardian had not gone for help because he feared to leave Dale utterly unprotected in the hands of the gang of cutthroats. He believed that he could rescue Dale himself. When the first watch became a little more drowsy, he would steal up behind the tree and cut the cotton rope.

Then Heck realized that Goff had disappeared entirely. He crept forward silently, his eyes alert, and a moment later he saw Goff stealing toward the walnut tree. He climbed noiselessly down over the face of the cliff, and followed Goff like a shadow. When Goff's hands touched the tree, By Heck was within ten

feet of it. Heck made sure his rifle was ready and took another step forward, watching, listening.

The shyster coal man leaned around the tree to the left. In the glow of the low-burned fire the blade of a small knife in his hand gleamed dull red. He whispered cautiously:

"You're in a fix, Dale. And it's none of my doing, either. Give me your word that I'll get that coal property for fifteen thousand, and I'll slash the rope. How about it? Sick of this country, aren't you?"

There came a few seconds of silence save for the lusty snoring of the sleepers and the musical tinkle of the little creek, after which Goff muttered disappointedly:

"Well, then, hang!"

And Heck knew that Dale had refused to sell the Moreland coal for a song even to save his life. As Goff stepped backward, the muzzle of the tall hillman's rifle went against the small of his back, and the tall hillman whispered hoarsely, through teeth tightly clenched:

"Slash 'at rope, damn yore soul! Slash 'at rope, or I wisht I may drap dead ef I don't shoot yore backbone into four thousand pieces, igod! Slash it!"

Goff straightened in surprise. The rifle's muzzle went harder against his back, and he knew it for exactly what it was. He moved a hand upward, then downward, and the cotton rope was severed in half a dozen places.

"Stiddy thar now!" whispered By Heck, and he began to back away. "Come along wi' me, ye dadslatted, banjer-bellied skunk. Bill he'll foller."

The three of them hurried into the deeper shadows. Soon Heck halted Goff and turned to Dale.

"S'arch him fo' a gun, Bill, old boy."

Dale lifted from Henderson Goff's right-hand coat-pocket a blued and stub-nosed magazine pistol.

"Dang my eyes and blast my forrard!" Heck exclaimed in a muffled voice. "He's plumb death on them little popguns, ain't he? Say, Goff, ef ever ye shoots me with a thing like that and I find it out, danged ef I don't spank ye ontel yore nose bleeds! Now le's go, you'uns. And ef ye jest cheep out a noise, Mister Goff, the buzzards will pick the meat offen yore bones afore to-morrer night."

"Move, shyster!" frowned Bill Dale.

By Heck led the way to the line of cliffs to the westward. They had climbed the rugged wall and were about to set out through the pitchy dark woodland, when a voice that they knew well hailed them softly from the laurels to their left:

"Hold on thar!"

"John Moreland, by jiggers!" muttered Heck.

Moreland hastened soundlessly to them. "I reckon ye didn't mean no harm, By," he said in tones that expressed a deep regret, "but yit I shore wisht ye hadn't na' done it."

Samuel Heck was very proud of himself. He straightened there in the darkness.

"What'n the name o' the devil makes ye wisht sech a thing as that, John?" he demanded in a half angry voice.

"'Cause," growled the big hillman, "you went and sp'iled hell out o' the main big picnic. We meant to

wipe out all o' them thar lowdown Balls and Torreys, By. When they went to hang Bill Dale in the mornin', we'd ha' had a good reason fo' a-killin' 'em everyone—the weasels! Ye see, By, every man Moreland but Caleb, and every man o' the Littlefords, is hid here in these laurels, and has been ever sence that thar fool trial begun. We was jest a-waitin'. How did we happen to know it?

“'At's easy, By. Me and Ben Littleford was on our way attar more dynamite, when we seed Bill Dale a-follerin' that stranger man, and Goff a-follerin' Bill, and you a-follerin' Goff. We knowed somethin' ongodly mean was in the wind. So I follered you, By, a-breakin' off bushes as I went to mark the trail, and Ben he went back and got the rest of 'em and follered me.”

Then to Dale, “Well, Bill, what're we a-goin' to do with this here cussed polecat Goff?”

Dale turned to the shyster coal man, who was still being closely watched by Heck.

“I told you I was pretty apt to thrash you the next time we met, didn't I?” clipped Dale. “Do you want to get out of this country for good, or do you want to fight me to a finish? I'm through talking right now, Goff.”

“I'd guess I'd rather fade,” acknowledged Goff.

“Then fade!”

Goff slunk off through the brush.

When they had covered a mile, John Moreland grasped Dale by an arm and said to him:

“I reckon you think we're sort o' blood-thirsty, by us a-wantin' to kill off that pack back thar; don't

ye? Well, we ain't blood-thirsty, Bill. Them Balls and Torreys ain't wo'th nothin' to theirselves, nor to their famblies, nor to nobody else. The sooner they're lead the better off they'll be, and the better off their famblies'll be, and the better off everybody else will be. You ain't safe, nor I ain't safe, as long as they're alive. They're wuss'n rattlesnakes, wuss'n copper-heads. . . .

"We like you, Bill Dale," he continued gravely. "And you're shore wo'th it. You wouldn't sell out to that cussed polecat, even to save yore own life, and that's what I calls narve and principle in ye. Bill Dale, there ain't many men in this here whole outfit who wouldn't give ye the last damned drap o' blood in their bodies, ef ye needed it. To the right, Bill—ahead of us is a clift."

CHAPTER XVII

A LETTER AND A PROPOSAL

THE Moreland Coal Company's two big rough buildings were completed in record time. There had been no further manifestations of interference from the Balls and Torreys, and Henderson Goff had been nowhere in evidence since the night of Bill Dale's ironclad verbal ultimatum. Work on the little railroad was progressing like wildfire, and everybody was in high spirits.

By Heck had just arrived with the mail. He stalked with an air of great importance into Dale's office, and threw the mail down on the new rolltop desk; then he stepped backward, dropped into a straight-back chair and began to nurse his rifle tenderly on his knees. There was a puzzled look on his leathery face. Dale had received half a dozen letters, and By Heck was at a loss to figure out the why of such an overwhelming amount of mail.

Dale finished his figuring, leaned back in his swivel-chair, and took up a letter that seemed altogether too bulky for a business letter. Moreover, its address was in pencil, and somewhat scrawled, though a chirography expert would have said that the handwriting showed strength of character.

"I wonder who it is," Dale muttered, "that mistakes

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is for a newspaper office and is sending us copy?"

"Jest what I was a-thinkin'," drawled By Heck through his Niagara Falls moustache. "Open her up, Bill; mebbe it's money, by Jake!"

Dale saw the postmark then, and his brows drew with interest. It was the postmark of his old home city.

"From Babe," he told himself,—and it was.

He opened it and read it. She had spelled most of her words correctly, but the only punctuation she used was a period and her capitals were few. For a wonder, she had put it into paragraphs:

Mr. bill Dale.
cartersville.
tennessee.

Kind friend.

i seat myself with pen in hand to drap you a few lines to let you know i am well hoping you the same. well bill i have some news to tell you about what hapened when i got back hear and since i got back and hear it is.

the first person i seen when i got to the railrode stashun was jimmy fayne and he was dressed up like a millionair and i reckon he is one. he took me in his moter car up to pats home. patrishia you know. pat she hugged me and jimmy left rite away but said he would be back. i asked pat had she heard about yore trubble bill and she answered no what. then i told her bout you and the lowdown black adam ball bill and she said pore old bill he had such a high temper nobody could ever understand it but it cant be are you serious elizabeth.

well i said yes i mean it. pat shook her head sorrowfie and said tell me all about it elizabeth deer. when i had told her the hole story about it we went up stares. pat and her husban lives in a big house now and it has got

up stares. pat went to a closet and got a butifle dress my size. i ordered this the day before you left us pat said but it mite half to be altered. wile you are dressing pat said i will speek to Mrs. Dale over the telephone. pat said yore mother has softened tord her son and i promised to tell her any news i had consarning him. i said all rite.

pat was gone down stares talking over the telephone for a long time and when she returned to me i was dressed and we went down stares together and the new dress diddent half to be altered. they call supper dinner hear bill. after dinner was over me and pat went to a swing at the end of a vranda which had a dim lite on it. pat spoke all of a suddent and said to me how would you like to go to live with Mrs. Dale bills mother. i remembered i haddent liked yore mother bill cause of what she said about me and i got about half mad. dont you want me to live hear with you pat i asked.

of corse pat said. ide be glad to have you but Mrs. Dale wants you too pat said. her treatment of her son which is you bill has most broke her hart pat said. pat said the only hold Mrs. Dale has on her son is through you elizabeth and she is a sad and remorsefe woman. then i got to thinking bill i mite be the cause of bringing peece between you and yore parrents and so i told pat i would go and i did. ime glad said pat but ime sorry to lose you but it is the best way and we can see each other often cant we deer.

well bill it wassent long until a big moter car called around at pats for me and setting in the hind seat was yore father hissself john k Dale. he helped me into the car with him and he seemed glad to see me. after we had said good morning and so forth he said anxious like now elizabeth please tell me all about bills trubble for patrisha mite have omited something you know. at first i was awful afeard of him bill but i soon got to liking him fine and i told him about you and that lowdown black adam ball from beginning to end and when i told him

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about the fite in the river he grinned and grinned and said you always was jam full of the fite stuff.

hell come out of it all rite the worst of it is his haveing to stay in jail until the trial comes off said your father at the next term of cote. weed better see if we cant get him out on a bond he said haddent we elizabeth and i said yes. bill i found yore mother indede a sad woman. there wassent much about her to remine me of the time when she called me a savaje person. she said i am delited you came elizabeth and i cride a little i couldnt help it when i jest half to cry i jest half to cry and nothing else dont help a bit. Because she kissed me bill.

well bill yore father he wired the athorties in cartersville and found out that cale Moreland had confessed to the shooting of blaek adam and you was free and it set his mind at rest. but it diddent set my mind at rest for because i no the mountain hart. i know cale Moreland is jest takeing yore place in jail until the day of the trial for that is the way of the Morelands. pore cale is a good boy. i am doing fine hear bill but i often wish i could have old Doe River hear to sing me to sleep like it used to. yore mother is teaching me how to read and rite and spell like pat did and i am learning fast. you can see by this letter i can rite an spell fine cant i.

well bill kind friend jimmy fayne has jest sent yore mothers made up hear to ask if he can see me and i will half to go down stares and see what he wants.

yores respectively.

BABE.

Bill Dale folded the bulky letter and put it slowly back into the envelope. Then his gaze wandered through a window and to where a golden-winged highholer was hammering industriously at the top branch of a dead tree. He smiled to himself, By Heck and nearly all of the rest of the world for the moment forgotten, and muttered aloud:

"'Yores respectively, Babe.'"

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed the keen-eared and watchful hillman in the straight-back chair behind him. "'Yores respectively, Babe!' Haw, haw, haw! Well, Bill, dadsling it, it shorely to goodness ain't nothin' to turn all that red about! When the night's gone the day comes, don't it? Bill, old boy, it's the same thing!"

"You get out of here, By!" Dale stormed in mock severity. "Go and help the commissary clerk with the new goods; eh?"

Heck laughed another horselaugh, rose and went out.

When he had gone, Dale turned his gaze toward the industriously hammering golden-winged bird again. He began to think—of the ultra-spoiled, charming-after-a-fashion, wealthy, young, high-night devotee, Jimmy Fayne. And he wondered, and wondered, what would come of Fayne's quick liking for Babe Littleford.

After he had viewed the matter from above and below and all sides around, he frowned like a berserker.

Here is what came of Jimmy Fayne's quick liking for Babe Littleford—

The days had passed swiftly, and autumn was far advanced. Save for a few chrysanthemums and asters that grew in places sheltered from the frosts, the flowers were all gone; the maples were shedding their leaves of brown, crimson and gold.

Ben Littleford's daughter had changed much in many ways. She had tried as hard as ever mortal tried to

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learn the correct use of words; and Mrs. Dale had been patient, painstaking and efficient in her teachings. Not that Elizabeth was educated, in any real sense of the word. Far from it. But her improvement was, in all truth, quite remarkable. Especially, perhaps, in her personal appearance; some innate, feminine thing had helped her here. She wore more or less costly gowns now, and a few jewels, thanks to Mrs. Dale, and wherever she went she attracted admiring glances.

Jimmy Fayne had been coming to see her when Mrs. Dale would permit it, which was not very often. Jimmy Fayne, as Patricia McLaurin had once been moved to say, was a far-seeing young man for all his weaknesses; he had known in advance that the laurel bloom would change to a rose, and then to a white hyacinth. Perhaps he even considered the fact that she would make a better wife for him, and a better mother for his children, than some fragile and over-cultured woman of a patrician house that had about run out. At any rate, Jimmy Fayne, the ultra-spoiled, had decided that he would marry her.

During those weeks that had been made happy by an occasional hour at the home of the Dales, Fayne had not once mentioned marriage. He figured, and wisely enough, that to be too quick with his proposal would be to lose everything.

But now he meant to propose, for he knew that Miss Littleford intended going home for a visit—and he knew that when she went home she would see Carlyle Dale. The truth was, of course, that Miss Littleford was going to Tennessee to attend the October term of court at Cartersville.

It was a little after the middle of a bright afternoon. He found her sitting on an iron settee in a secluded corner of the lawn, where cape jessamines and lilac bushes grew in orderly array. She wore a light wrap, and there was an easy-to-read book in her hands; but she wasn't trying to read at the moment.

He bared his head, greeted her pleasantly, and asked permission to sit down beside her. She looked up at him. He was immaculately dressed.

"Of course," she granted with a smile that was very winsome. "I hope you're over the cold you had last week, Jimmy."

"I never felt better," he assured her, dropping at her side. He stated his mission briefly, for Mrs. Dale might appear at any minute.

"I came, Elizabeth, to ask you to marry me."

She sat as still as though she had not heard. He went on hastily:

"I confess that I'm a little ashamed of trying to take you from Carlyle Dale, for he was always very nice to me. But I may be forgiven for that, I think, because I care for you a great deal. Anyway—'All is fair in love and war'—you know."

His voice was hardly businesslike, but it lacked original fire. Elizabeth Littleford closed the book in her lap, and lifted her clear brown eyes to his eager face.

"No," she disagreed, "all ain't—isn't fair in love and war. That's one o' the very silliest sayin's I've ever heard. As for the other—I like you, Jimmy, but not in the way you want me to. It's Bill Dale that I like—in that way, Jimmy."

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Fayne looked disappointed. He was silent.

"You're a good boy, Jimmy," she went on, "and I hate to make you feel the least bit bad. It makes me—oh, Jimmy, it makes me blue. I wish you hadn't asked me. But I want you to know that I feel proud o' the honour, Jimmy. You'd better go, maybe, because it wasn't easy for me to turn you down. I'm sure you'll find some better girl than me—than *I*—for a wife."

"There is no better girl than you, Elizabeth. I'm going to wait—and hope."

He took up one of her hands and kissed it, rose and went toward the street. Before he had been gone a minute, she rose, her face a little pale, and stared after him, sorely tempted—for Fayne's money could bring her people out of their long night of ignorance!

Well, if she didn't marry Bill Dale—and she feared that she wouldn't—she would marry Jimmy Fayne, if he still wanted her—if he would agree to help her people. After all, it wasn't so much to give. What was one poor little, unhappy human life?

It was late, that night, when Elizabeth Littleford went to sleep. And when at last she slept, she dreamed of walking through a fragrant green meadow with Bill Dale. There was the low humming of wild bees about the purple crowns of the ironweed and the scarlet bloom of the clover; there was the mating call of the partridge, and the lovelorn coo of a dove. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

TRIED

TWO days before Bill Dale was tried in court at Cartersville, the new Elizabeth Littleford alighted from an afternoon train at the Half-way Switch. She was dressed in a smart and neatly-fitting suit of dark blue, with lacey white at her throat and at her wrists; she wore a hat of dark blue relieved by a touch of white. In one of her strong and well-shaped, gloved hands she carried a travelling-bag of black leather.

A big and sunburned young man in boots and corduroys hastened to her. He raised his broad-rimmed hat, smiled, took the bag, and pressed her hand as though he were very glad to see her.

"Bill Dale!" she cried joyously above the roar of the passing train. "Bill Dale, it's you!"

"Sure, it's me!" laughed Dale. He waited for the train to pass them; then he turned to her again. "How good you look! I can hardly believe it's you."

"But it is," she smiled. "Tell me: what do you think the outcome o' your trial is going to be?"

Dale noted that her English had improved, and it was gratifying to him. As for the trial—

"I don't know," he said, thoughtfully caressing his tanned chin with finger and thumb. "But Major

Bradley thinks I'll come clear. He believes that somebody that was hidden on the mountainside above us shot Ball to save me. By Heck hinted that he knew that this was the case; and he intimated that I would stand a better chance of acquittal than anybody else would stand, and that if I received a sentence the right man would come forward with a confession. I have an idea that By Heck himself killed Adam Ball—that is, if I didn't do it."

"And Cale Moreland—wasn't it fine for him to do what he done for you, Bill Dale? It's somethin' like Damon and Pythias, ain't—isn't it? Your mother told me the story of Damon and Pythias, and I read it, too. How are you gettin' along with the mine?"

"First rate," Dale answered, brightening at once. "We're shipping now. Look!"

He turned and pointed down the tracks.

"See that trestlework over the short siding? That's our coal tipple. See that string of little cars on the trestlework? They have just emptied coal into the big steel gondola cars below. And we're getting a smashing price for every ounce of it."

"I see," said the young woman. He went on:

"All of the boys and girls of the Morelands, except the very little ones, are in school at Cartersville, and they're learning fast. When our borrowed capital is paid back, the Moreland families are going to buy farms lying near Cartersville and go to them. A big lowland farm close to good schools and a good little town—well, there are worse places on earth. Pity poor David Moreland can't know about it."

"I'd say!"

She hung her head. She was thinking, as she had so often thought before, of her own benighted people.

"And the Littlefords?" she murmured. It had slipped past her lips. Dale and the Morelands owed the Littlefords nothing.

Dale understood, and he gave her a sympathetic glance.

"A few of the boys and girls of the Littlefords are going to school in Cartersville, perhaps one from each family," he told her. "It is rather expensive, you know, on account of the boarding, and they can't afford to send all their children. We pay them good wages for their work, but it costs a good deal to live. However, I think—ultimately—your people will have their chance for education, too."

"But it won't do much good to educate one out o' each family," said Elizabeth. "They'd come straight back here when they got through with their schoolin', and soon fo'git—I mean *forget*!—it all. If they make their learnin' pay 'em anything, they'll have to stay where they can use it."

She began to stare absently toward her well-shod feet.

"Are you ready to go?" Dale asked.

Elizabeth Littleford raised her head with a slight jerk and said rather awkwardly:

"Has the valley changed much?"

"Not very much," answered Dale. "We've got a commissary building, and an office and supplies building. There's a new log church, where an old minister named Ashby Cross preaches the gospel of straight-walking and human kindness every Sunday. Hender-

son Goff isn't here any more, but he sent me his address in case we wanted to sell the mine! The Torreys have gone back to Jerusalem Cove and Hatton's Hell, and the Balls are as quiet as mice. These, I believe, are all the changes worth mentioning."

Together they set out and walked, without saying much, to the crest of David Moreland's Mountain, and there they halted. The autumn sun, a great red ball of fire, was just setting beyond the majestic Big Pine.

Dale pointed to a long, moss-covered slab of brown sandstone.

"Let's sit down there and rest," he suggested. "You're tired, Babe, I know. Don't mind my calling you 'Babe,' do you?"

She looked at him as though she were surprised at his asking that. They sat down, and he pointed.

"You'll enjoy that sunset. And the view from here is magnificent. The mountains, as you've already noticed, have on their autumnal attire. The colours are glorious, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Babe, "the colours are glorious."

"Beautiful," he ran on. "I know the trees now, by their colours. That brilliant saffron over there——"

"Saffron—excuse me, Bill, for not havin' any better manners! But what is saffron?"

"Deep yellow, y'know."

"Oh, yaller. No—yellow; yes, you're right. That's hickory, that yal—yellow."

"Yes," and he nodded and smiled. "Brown, reddish brown, golden brown, mottled scarlet: the oaks. That transparent yellow; that's poplar. Deep red means

sourwood. And that blazing crimson away down there along the valley's rim is sumach. Eh, Babe?"

"Yes."

Bill Dale suddenly leaned toward her and took one of her hands; and he didn't take it as Jimmy Fayne had done—as though he were afraid of it.

"You know I love you, don't you, Babe?"

"I've been believin' it," she told him after a moment of painful silence. She was a trifle pale now. "But it—Bill Dale, it somehow don't seem just right for you to love me. Because I'm such a pore little nobody. I'm as ignorant as sin; and I hain't—haven't even got good manners. But—but if you love, if you're sure you do, tell me why!"

There came another minute of painful silence.

"Because," said Dale, speaking slowly, "you have always seemed to be one of my own kind. You seem real, to me. I was so sick of artificialities in women that I loved you the moment I saw you. You didn't have your face enamelled, and you didn't pose as a fashion plate, and you didn't mention politics. I know you are primitive, but I am primitive, too. And you weren't calling yourself 'Ma-a-am-mah' to a damned poodle. . . .

"Major Bradley," he went on, "feels sure that I will be acquitted. If it turns out like that, I want you to marry me at once. These months without you have been very lonesome for me. Your education can be finished afterward; I'll teach you myself. Tell me—will you, Babe?"

How boyishly impatient he was. Was he afraid he would lose her by waiting?

"You love me, don't you, Babe?" he pursued.

She faced him with the sudden, queer light of a tragedy in her eyes. But she didn't speak. He pressed her hand until it hurt and demanded:

"You do, don't you, Babe?"

"Yes," she told him, in a voice that he barely heard.

"Then why won't you marry me?"

She didn't answer. She wouldn't answer.

The day of the trial dawned clear, with the snap of autumn in the air. It was not often that little Cartersville had so many visitors in one day. Since most of these visitors were mountainfolk, the business streets were lined with oxwagons and saddled mules.

The courthouse was filled to its capacity within fifteen minutes after the doors were thrown open. Every man who had a rifle was forced to leave it behind with the sheriff's deputies; a company of the State's militia was there, and each member of it had a hundred rounds of ball cartridges in his belt—the authorities were taking no chances. Either way the trial went, there might be a fight—if the accused received sentence, the Morelands and the Littlefords were likely to attempt to set him free; if the accused were acquitted, the Balls and their kinsmen were apt to give trouble.

The Balls and their kinsmen had been drinking a great deal of white liquor that morning.

Amid a breathless hush, the wheels of the law began to move. Caleb Moreland quickly told what he had to say, and backed it up with proof; he brought out a perfect alibi. The judge and the jury frowned and

smiled in the same instant. Dale went forward and took his place. He pleaded "Not Guilty." A little later the State introduced its evidence and rested.

The counsel for the defense, patrician and soldier-like, immaculate from his toes to the crown of his head, went eagerly to his feet. He had fully prepared himself, and he delivered his argument with an eloquent and forceful swing. It was plain that the jury was favorably impressed by the words of this man who never accepted a case unless he was absolutely sure that his client was in the right.

Major Bradley hinged his argument on the mysterious third shot. If Dale's bullet had killed Adam Ball, would not Adam Ball have been shot squarely or at least nearly squarely from the front? As it was, the Goliath had been shot straight through the temples! That third shot had been fired by some hidden friend of Dale's, the major declared, and it had been done for the purpose of saving Dale's life. Ball had been in the act of playing a cowardly trick; he had killed a man in North Carolina by just such a trick—and he had boasted of it.

The attorney for the State made a rejoinder that almost favoured the defendant. Then the court charged the jury, and the twelve good men retired.

The jury was out not more than twenty minutes, but to Elizabeth Littleford it was an age of torture. She sat directly behind Bill Dale, between her father and John Moreland.

The twelve men filed slowly in and faced the judge, who turned austere eyes upon them and asked:

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

They had. Elizabeth Littleford's head swam as she bent forward to catch the foreman's words—

"Not guilty!"

A wild shout rose from the leathery throat of the happy By Heck. The Morelands and the Littlefords cheered until they were hoarse. Sheriff Tom Flowers had difficulty in quieting the tumult. Bill Dale shook hands until his shoulders ached. The Balls and their relatives, bitter with resentment and hatred, stole out, were given their rifles, and went toward the big hills with the eye of the militia hard upon them.

Then the Morelands and the Littlefords and the Hecks, with Dale and his mining man Hayes, came out, and they, too, started for the big hills.

Dale had hired a horse and a side saddle for Ben Littleford's daughter, and the two rode in each other's company on the journey home. When they were well into the mountains, Dale drew his horse over close to that of his companion.

"As soon as I can build and furnish——" he began, when Elizabeth interrupted:

"We're ridin' too fast. We're too much ahead o' the others. One o' them Balls might try to pick you off with his rifle gun."

"Not much danger of that," Dale replied. "The Balls have already been warned about sniping; your father told them that their very name would be scoured off the earth if there was any sniping. They would never attack the combined force of your people and the Morelands: even their white liquor couldn't make

them do it. Besides, By Heck is acting as advance guard somewhere ahead of us."

He continued, "As soon as I can build and furnish a little house out near the mine, I want you to marry me, Babe. Will you?"

Elizabeth Littleford seemed not to have heard.

"Will you, Babe?"

She faced him sadly. He saw in her hazel eyes the same queer light of tragedy that he had seen there a day or two before; and now, as then, he wondered what it could mean. He rode still closer to her, and put his arm about her waist, and kissed her almost savagely. It was sweet to him—very, very sweet to him.

"Tell me, Babe!"

Her head fell forward. The sunlight found glints of gold in her thick chestnut-brown hair. She was silent for a moment; then her voice came dully:

"I'd better not marry you, Bill Dale."

Dale sat up straight and rigid in his saddle and stared hard at her solemnly beautiful profile. He could hardly believe that he had heard correctly. He knew she loved him. She had told him that she loved him. Then why wouldn't she marry him?

Often he had heard the old saying that to change her mind is woman's first privilege; often he had heard that women were never understood by men. . . . He tried to reason it out, and the attempt made his brain ache; he was unable to reason. He knew only that she was all of the future to him, all of the world to him, and—that she had refused to marry him.

They rode silently along the winding and tortuous, laurel-bordered mountain road, which led ever upward.

When they were within two miles of home, Dale went suddenly white and caught her almost rudely by a wrist.

"Is it Jimmy Fayne?" he demanded hotly.

She gave him a reproachful glance and said nothing. He flung her hand from him angrily. His grey eyes were as cold as steel, and his jaw was set hard.

Dale did not speak again until they had entered the broad valley that was home to him. Somehow he felt limp now. The great wave of anger had passed.

"I guess you are too good for me," he said. There was weakness in his voice, and it was the first weakness she had ever known in him. He went on, and in tones so low that she barely heard:

"I'm a plain, rough, everyday sort of fellow, and you—to me you are the finest and most beautiful woman in the world. And I hurt your wrist! I can see it's still red. It was the damned savage in me—the primitive, cave man streak that I could never account for. May the hand that hurt you wither. . . .

"A letter from my mother told me that Jimmy had stopped drinking on your account. Be careful that he doesn't get back to it. His father drinks, and his grandfather drank himself to death; he has an inherited thirst, if there is such a thing. Jimmy is a capital fellow, I guess; but—if you let him get back to drinking, he's lost. And so are you."

Dale spoke with a certain piteous gentleness in his voice toward the last. Elizabeth noted it, and it was iron to her soul.

"Will you always think of me as the finest and most beautiful woman in the world?" she asked.

"Always."

"It's the best I can hope for," murmured Elizabeth.

"What do you mean?"

"It's the best I can hope for," Elizabeth repeated as though she were talking to herself.

They rode on in silence.

There was no sleep for Bill Dale that night. The sweetness of his liberty had all been taken away by Babe Littleford's refusal to marry him. He became bitter toward her again. She had been exceedingly unfair to him: while she really loved him, she was going to marry Jimmy Fayne because he had so much money. She was ungrateful to him: it was through him that she was being educated, being lifted out of her uncouth and illiterate self and set on a higher social and intellectual plane. All he had ever heard of the so-called unfathomable mystery of womankind he now believed, and more. All this, of course, was unworthy. But Bill Dale was intensely human, and to be human is to be unworthy.

It turned cold that night. A little before noon of the next day, By Heck, with a pair of bright red suspenders lying like twin streaks of fire over his faded cotton shirt, stepped into the Moreland Coal Company's office. Heck was inordinately proud of those suspenders, because they were so red and because Bill Dale had given them to him.

"I've got 'em on, ye see," he grinned, setting the butt of his rifle carefully between his toes.

Dale looked wearily up from his littered desk.

"Yes," he replied irritably, "I can easily see that.

You're going without a coat, and half freezing, for the sake of showing those suspenders. I am very much obliged to you for shooting Adam Ball, By."

"It's hell, Bill, ain't it?"

"What?"

Heck leaned over and rested his knotty hands on the muzzle of the inevitable rifle.

"Whatever it is you're a-grievin' about, o' course. Babe Littleford she went back to yore home town this mornin', Bill. Sort o' quare, I thought, 'at you never went with her over to the Switch. Sort o' quare, too, 'at she never rid over on the little ingyne instid o' walkin'. But mebbe she was afeard o' gittin' her fine city clo'es all smuttet up. Say, Bill, old boy, I wisht I may drap dead in my tracks ef you don't look like a damned corpst, igod. It haf to be hell, or you wouldn't grieve about it. 'Smatter? Babe?"

Dale rose. He put his hands on his hips and glared at By Heck.

"I'm going to have the truth, By; now get that. Did you, or did you not, kill Adam Ball to save me?"

By Heck realized that he would have to be very cunning if he evaded the question now. Bill Dale, his god, would not be put off longer.

So By Heck answered: "I wisht I may drap dead this minute and turn into a cross-eyed mink with a green tail and pink eyes; I wisht the devil may take me and spend ten thousand etarnities a-stickin' red-hot, pepper-coated pitchforks in me and not let me have any tobacker; I wisht I may be struck blind and deaf and dumb and paralyzed and ha' my tongue cut out

and my ears and toe-nails wore off—ef I killed Adam Ball to save you or anybody else.”

And then, having answered, he favoured Dale with an odd look, took up his rifle and strode out of the office humming:

“When I die, don’t bury me deep
Put no tombstone at my head and feet
Put a bear’s jawbone in my right hand——”

“But he’s the biggest liar in the State,” muttered Dale, turning back to his desk.

He closed his desk, and he didn’t work any more that day. Babe Littleford had gone without even bothering to tell him good-bye!

CHAPTER XIX

CONFESSION

IF the impulsive, fighting Bill Dale could have heard across the intervening miles the conversation that took place in his old home the next evening, he would probably have followed Ben Littleford's daughter by the next train if he had had to hold it up at the point of an honest blue gun in order to get aboard it.

John K. Dale and his wife had gone into the library with Elizabeth at her request. The three sat down facing each other. The younger woman was ill at ease; she was glad that the lights were subdued and soft. When the silence had become heavy, she straightened in her chair and blurted falteringly:

"Bill asked me to m-marry him, and I wouldn't do it. I—I thought maybe I—I ought to tell you."

The Dales exchanged glances; then they looked back at Elizabeth Littleford. Mrs. Dale was in a manner relieved, for, had the choosing been left to her, she never would have chosen this girl from the backwoods—her good traits and undeniable beauty notwithstanding.

Dale smiled a fatherly smile. Mrs. Dale's eyes narrowed. The old stiffness rose within her and began to make stubborn war against her more recently acquired commonsense.

"Have you quarreled?" she asked.

"No."

"Well," old Dale said bluntly, "what's wrong?"

"It isn't his fault," Elizabeth told them. "I'm a savage," she went on desperately—"and he isn't my kind."

"But you'll stay here with me for a while, won't you?" Mrs. Dale asked—for the mountain girl seemed now the only hold they had on the son they wanted back with so much deep longing.

"Ye-es," said Elizabeth.

John K. Dale retired very early that night. When the sound of his footsteps had died away, his wife bent toward Elizabeth and said curiously:

"Why did you call yourself a savage?"

Elizabeth realized that there would be some comfort in unburdening her mind to ears that she did not doubt were sympathetic, and she believed she could trust Mrs. Dale.

She told of her early life in the hills, of the feud between her people and the Morelands and of how she had hated the bloodshed. She told of the coming of Major Bradley, of her burning thirst for education, of the old trainman who had thrown her a newspaper each day, and of the coming of Bill Dale.

"I was lonesome," she continued, "and nobody ever seemed to understand how I felt. That is, until Bill Dale came. After I met him, I couldn't see anything but him; he seemed to me like somethin' I'd had and lost. . . ."

"Then," said Mrs. Dale, "why did you refuse to marry——"

"Wait—you don't know it all," Elizabeth interrupted her. "There was the killin' o' that heathen, Adam Ball. I went to 'tend the trial because I knew I could clear your son if Major Bradley couldn't. You see, Mrs. Dale, I happened to know who did kill Adam Ball, and I meant to tell if it was necessary.

"On the mornin' of the killin', Bill had started up the river by himself. He had said he didn't want comp'ny. It was dangerous for him to go off like that, on account o' them Balls and Torreys. My father said it was dangerous, and John Moreland said it was. Back in the Big Pine country there is a tall, thin man named Sam Heck. He's a big eater, an awful liar, and a worshipper of Bill Dale. Sam heard my father say it was dangerous, and he whispered: 'I'll jest sneak through the laurels and gyard Bill from ahind him.' I heard him say it, Mrs. Dale.

"So he went sneakin' along the foot o' the north end o' David Moreland's Mountain, with his rifle in his hand, to guard your son. Bill didn't know he was bein' followed, because Heck is as crafty as a cat. I got nervous about Bill, so I went into the laurels and followed Sam Heck. When I overtook him, he was standin' behind a clump o' sheeplaurel and lookin' toward the river.

"I whispered, 'Where's Bill?'

"He said, 'Be still, Babe!' And then he thumbed his rifle's hammer back without a sound.

"I looked toward the river and saw Bill Dale a-walkin' up the nearest bank, and I saw Black Adam slip behind a tree not far away. Bill saw Adam, and he slipped behind a tree, too. Adam shot at Bill's hat, and teased

Bill. Bill shot at Adam's hat—and then Adam Ball jumped up groanin' like he was done for, and fell, all a-twistin', to the ground. But he wasn't hit. He put his gun out by the tree to kill Bill as soon as he showed himself. It was one o' his old tricks."

Elizabeth Littleford raised her head slowly and went on in a voice that was much shaken:

"Sam Heck had nearly got a hair-fine aim at Ball. Sam is a good shot, but he's awful slow. I whispered to him:

"Shoot, for God's sake, shoot! Shoot—you fool!"

"I had always talked against killin', and yet I stood there and begged Sam Heck to finish him. The rest happened in no time. Ball was already a-lookin' along his sights. Bill Dale was nearly out in the open. I——" she faltered, and then came a rush of words: "I wouldn't marry him without tellin' him, because it wouldn't be fair to him; and if I told him, he—he wouldn't have me. The woman he marries mustn't be a—a s-savage."

She stopped and stared at Mrs. Dale almost defiantly. Her head was high, and her hands were clasped in her lap so hard that they trembled.

"I think you have made a mountain out of a mole-hill, my dear," the older woman said gently. "What you did was right, not wrong; any good woman would have done just what you did, Elizabeth, I am sure."

Elizabeth Littleford faced Mrs. John K. Dale squarely. There was a strange glow in her eyes.

"But I haven't told you everything," she murmured—"I took Sam Heck's rifle from him, and killed Adam Ball myself."

CHAPTER XX

BILL DALE LAUGHS

THE twentieth of December came with winter in dead earnest. It was a blue and desolate day. A bleak, howling north wind, as sharp as a sword, swept the mountain-crests clean and whipped the branches of the trees furiously. Powdery snow lay in little drifts wherever there was shelter for it. Sparkling Doe River was edged with jagged crusts of ice as white as the gaunt, bare sycamores that lined its banks.

Bill Dale sat thinking of what he had done there in the Big Pine country. His gaze wandered soberly out at the office window and went down the wind-swept valley. From the stone-and-clay chimneys of the cabins of the Littlefords on the other side of the river the howling wind snatched sprays of blue wood-smoke. The cabins of the Morelands were all vacant save for one, and in that one lived the moonshiner, By Heck, and his mother, the fortune-teller. The Morelands had gone to farms lying around Cartersville in the lowland, on each of which a fair-sized first payment had been made; the borrowed capital was to remain borrowed for another year. The Morelands were already losing their outlandishness and growing into universal respect. David Moreland's dream was at last being realized.

Then Dale frowned heavily. If only he could do as much for Babe's people! But he couldn't. The men of the Littlefords still worked the coal mine. They received almost twice the customary wages, but even that wouldn't buy them farms and educate their children.

Bill Dale shook his head and began to think of the young woman who, less than three months before, had refused to marry him. That she had married nobody else was no great comfort. But after a moment he resolutely put thoughts of Babe Littleford out of his mind, just as he had done a thousand times before during those long and lonesome weeks that had passed since he had seen her, and turned back to his desk.

There under his eyes lay two unanswered letters from his parents. He found little pleasure in answering their letters, for he was still somewhat bitter toward them—toward his father because of his father's ill treatment of David Moreland and David Moreland's people; toward his mother because she had let him go hungry for mother-love as a baby, as a child, as a boy, and as a man; toward them both because he had been reared a do-nothing.

And then—it is a little like the postscript to a flapper schoolgirl's letter, one may think—he believed that his mother had been largely instrumental in bringing about that which he supposed to be a love affair between Babe Littleford and Jimmy Fayne.

The door opened suddenly, and By Heck came stamping in with a gust of cold air at his back. He carried in one hand the mail satchel; in the other was his ever-present rifle. After throwing the satchel to the floor at Dale's feet, he turned to the glowing wood stove.

"I'm dang nigh friz, Bill," he chattered. "My gosh, I couldn't be no colder'n what I em ef I'd ha' clim the nawth pole neck-ed. Say, Bill, why'n't ye burn coal 'stid o' wood? Igod, it's hotter."

"Coal is worth money. Wood isn't."

Dale ran through the mail hastily. He threw aside a letter from the Alexander Crayfield Coal Corporation, which took the entire output of the mine at an extraordinary figure, and picked up a letter which bore the postmark of his home city.

It was from Babe Littleford. Since he paid so little attention to the letters of his parents, they had requested her to write to him—they wanted him to come home for his Christmas dinner. Wouldn't he come?

He arose and paced the office floor for two or three minutes, then he sat down at his desk and dashed off a letter that contained only two sentences.

By Heck sat beside the stove and watched his god with thoughtful eyes. He understood, he believed. How any woman on earth could turn down a man like Bill Dale was utterly beyond him. By Heck was a great deal like a good-natured dog. . . .

If Bill would only laugh, it would be good for him. It had been so long since he had heard Bill laugh. By Heck decided that he would make Bill Dale laugh.

"Old boy?"

"Well?"

"Do ye want me to tell ye a funny tale?" drawled Heck. He barely heard the answer:

"I guess I don't mind, By."

Heck's sympathy made him gulp. But he swallowed the lump that came up in his throat and began bravely:

"One time the' was a feller named Smith. Odd name, Bill, ain't it? 'Hossfly' Smith, they called him, 'cause it was said 'at he could easy shoot a hossfly offen a hoss's ear and never break hide on the animile. He was a hellion, too. He was a politics man, never done nothin' else, and he rode a dun-coloured hoss—and ef ye don't know what colour that is, it ain't no colour at all. One time Hossfly, he was a-tryin' to git app'inted the chairman o' some sort o' politics doin's, and on that same day he was a-drinkin' sort o' tol'able heavy. They agreed to make him the temp'rary chairman, but Hossfly, he didn't want that. So he hops right up in the middle o' the meetin', and he hollers out and says:

"'Feller citizens,' he says, 'I want to be the permanent chairman! I ain't a-goin' to act in the cap-acity of a durned temp'rary chairman; I abso-damn-lutely ain't!'

"His old inemy, Eb Wright, he yells back and says smart-like: 'Set down thar, Hossfly,' says Eb—'you're drunk, and you don't know the difference atween temp'rary and permanent!'

"Well, they knowed Eb had it a-comin' to him right then, and they listened fo' it. Hossfly, he addresses the whole meetin', and this here is what Hossfly says:

"'Feller citizens,' says he, 'Eb Wright thar 'lows I don't know the difference atween temp'rary and permanent. I'll prove to you that I *do* know the difference. Eb Wright says I'm drunk. I am. That's temp'rary. Eb Wright is a poke-nosed idjit. That's permanent!'

Heck finished with a lazy laugh: "Haw, haw, haw! Hee-haw, hee-haw!"

"That story," Dale said wearily, "has been told on dozens of politicians. It has become a part of the history of this State."

"Well, my gosh!" moaned By Heck. He thought deeply for a moment, decided that Bill Dale wouldn't laugh at the story of Tom Jones' pig—which had drank all of a gallon-pail of buttermilk and then gone to sleep in the self-same pail—and went on:

"Here's one, by Jake, 'at ain't been told on dozens o' politics men. And every word of it is the solemn, dyin', death-bed truth, too.

"One time I was out in the mountains a-huntin', a-goin' along slow and a-lookin' fo' a squirrel, when all of a sudden I hears a skeery noise right ahead o' me in the laurels—Z-z-z-z-z! Z-z-z-z-z! Jest like that. I stops. I stops de-e-ad still. I looks keen. Thar was a den o' rattlers, and the very least one was as big around as my left hind laig! Then I hears a turrible growl right ahind o' me. I looks keen. Thar stands a big old she-bear with her teeth a-showin', and two cross-eyed cubs! Then I hears a whine at my left. I looks keen. Thar stands a she-panther as big as a hoss, with her eyes jest a-blazin'! Then I hears a spittin' sound out to my right. I looks keen. Thar was seven full-grown wildcats, and all of 'em had been bit by a mad dawg! Some fix to be in? Yeuh; some fix!

"Well, I thinks to myself. Ef I shoots the rattlers, I thinks to myself, the bear and the panther and the wildcats'll git me. And ef I shoots the bear, the panther and the wildcats and the rattlers'll git me. And ef I shoots the panther, the wildcats and the rattlers and

the bear'll git me. And ef I shoots the wildcats, the rattlers and the bear and the panther'll git me. And ef I don't shoot none of 'em, they'll all git me! Some ongodly fix, wasn't it, Bill? Now, how do ye reckon I got out of it?"

Bill Dale only smiled. "I can't imagine, By," he said.

"I cain't imagine, neither," grinned Heck. "But anyhow I'm alive to-day. Well, now that ye're in a good humour one time more, I'll tell ye some news. I hated to ruffle ye up like a yaller goose a-flyin' back'ards whilst ye was so cussed, danged blue. Bill, old boy, it ain't but five days ontel Christmas."

"Do you mean that for news?"

"Not edzactly," said By Heck. "But I mean this here fo' news: A lot o' them Nawth Ca'liner Turners from Turner's Laurel is a-visitin' their kinfolks, the Balls, and they'll every dadslatted one of 'em git drunk on white lightnin' licker fo' Christmas, and—they'll shore think o' Black Adam. The Morelands ain't with ye no more, Bill, rickollect; only the Littlefords is here now."

Bill Dale rose and stood there staring at By Heck with eyes so bright that they sparkled.

"If they came down on us looking for trouble, I'd be a sort of clan chief, wouldn't I?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer: "I wouldn't mind that, y'know. I've got a letter here, By, that I want you to put aboard the next southbound train that passes the Halfway Switch. You've got about an hour; can you make it?"

"Ef the world was made in six days, by God, it

shorely looks like By Heck could make six miles in a hour, don't it?"

The tall hillman left the Moreland Coal Company's office with the letter in one hand, his rifle in the other, and tears of joy in his eyes.

For Bill Dale had laughed, actually laughed.

By Heck put the letter on the train. The train carried it to Bill Dale's home city, and the postman carried it to the stately mansion of Old Coal King John K. Dale, and black Isham, the servant, carried it to Miss Elizabeth Littleford.

Miss Elizabeth Littleford was sitting alone on an iron settee among bushes of lilac and cape jessamine; the weather had made another of its remarkably sudden changes, and the day was sunny and pleasant. She was about to tear open the envelope when the tall, straight figure of Jimmy Fayne appeared before her. He had on riding clothes, and there was a rawhide quirt in his hand.

"You scared me, Jimmy!" laughed Miss Elizabeth, a trifle nervously. "I didn't know you were anywhere around!"

"Beg pardon," Jimmy smiled. "May I sit down beside you?"

"Yes."

He sat down beside her and began thoughtfully to flick the toe of one of his shining boots with the tip of his quirt. She knew what he had come to say, before he said it:

"Once more," looking pleadingly into her eyes—

"won't you marry me and make me happy forever afterward?"

She turned the letter over in her lap in order that Fayne might not see, accidentally or otherwise, the address.

"Jimmy," she finally said, "I'd like to have a little more time to think about it. Things like this oughtn't to be decided in a hurry."

"You've already had months! Or were they years—or ages? Why do you keep putting me off like this, Elizabeth?"

"As I told you, Jimmy, I don't——"

He interrupted almost sharply: "I know you don't love me. But you'll learn to—after you've seen how much I shall adore you."

He made a move as though to take her into his arms, and she shrank from him; he had done that same thing, and she had done that same thing, dozens of times before. . . . With unseeing eyes Elizabeth watched Mrs. Dale step from her motor at the portecochere and go into the house. Jimmy Fayne, too, saw Mrs. Dale, but he was wholly unaffected by the sight of her; Mrs. Dale, *somehow*, did not object to his seeing the girl quite as much as she had once objected.

"Jimmy," after a long silence had passed between them, "I—I'm afraid I ain't the right woman for you. . . . If you knew, for sure, that I once took a rifle gun and killed a man with it, would you—would you still want me?"

Fayne laughed as though at a good joke.

"You kill a man? Why, I couldn't believe it. But if you had killed a man, or a dozen men, it—it could hardly make any difference to me. If you did do it, you did it because there was nothing else to do; I'm sure of that. We won't mention it again, if you're willing. I neither criticize nor attempt to understand your hill codes. Marry me, won't you, Elizabeth?"

"If I did," asked Ben Littleford's daughter, "would you help my people back in the hills?"

"Educate 'em? Yes! Every blessed one of 'em."

"Freely?"

"Yes!"

Once more Elizabeth Littleford tried to decide. Fayne's eyes grew more and more hopeful as he watched her lips. He became impatient.

"Tell me," he begged.

The girl took up the letter she had just received from Bill Dale.

"As soon as I read this," she murmured, "I'll tell you, Jimmy. If you don't mind, please look the other way for a minute."

She tore off one end of the envelope, drew out the single sheet and unfolded it. Her eyes narrowed; her face flushed, and then became just a little pale. Her underlip quivered as she folded the sheet and put it back into the envelope.

"I can't marry you, Jimmy," she told him.

Without another word she arose and left him. She hastened to the house, hastened upstairs, and went to her room.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Dale found her lying face

downward on her bed, and beside her lay a crumpled sheet of paper. Mrs. Dale picked up the sheet, straightened it out, and read this, in the bold handwriting of her son:

"Believe me, I am very appreciative of your invitation. But I am having Christmas with your mother, here in my own country."

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST FIGHT

IT was early in the morning, and Bill Dale had just sent for Ben Littleford. The hillman hurried to the office, for he believed he knew what was in the air. He had already gone to work at the mine, and his thick beard, his face and his hands were black with the dust of coal.

"Sit down, Ben," said the general manager. "We're going to hold a council of war."

Littleford took a chair and crossed his legs.

"Is it the Ball outfit?" he drawled.

"Yes," answered the younger man, and forthwith he told the other of the news that By Heck had brought him a few days before; he had not given the matter really serious consideration until that morning. "Now, he finished, 'I want to know whether you think there's any danger?'"

Littleford tugged at his blackened beard and frowned.

"Bill," he said soberly, "do you rickollect what John Moreland told you oncet about them Balls? He told ye 'at you wasn't safe, and 'at he wasn't safe, ontel they was dead and buried, didn't he? I believe he did. By Heck says the's a whole big passel o' them Nawth Ca'liner Turners; he's shore them and the Balls'll out-

number us more'n two to one. Yes, the's danger, Bill, and 'specially to you. They think it was you killed Adam, and they don't think the law handed 'em a square deal at the trial. You can shore look fo' trouble to come a-hellin' when they've good and begun their Christmas drinkin', and I'd bet a solid gold hoss to a safety-pin they're at it right now."

"Then listen to this plan," said Dale.

"I'll keep By Heck up the river watching for them. He will have three sticks of dynamite tied together and capped and fitted with a fuse. If he sees them coming this way in anything like a force, he will fire off the dynamite as a signal to us. Our men will gather here in the upstairs of this building, and bar the doors——"

"Oh, Bill," moaned the old fighter, "you shorely don't think we'd ever let 'em git to the doors!"

"I hope they don't, certainly," smiled Dale. "Where are your rifles, Ben?"

"At the mine," said Littleford. "Ye see, Bill, we've been a-lookin' fo' trouble."

Dale went on, "At By Heck's signal, I'll get on my horse and ride to the lowlands for the Morelands. I can get them a lot quicker than I can get competent help from the law. What do you think of it?"

"It's a good plan, I reckon," growled Ben Littleford, "only I don't cotton very easy to the idee o' us a-runnin' from the mine to this here buildin'. I never did like to run from any man wo'th a durn, Bill."

"But that wouldn't be cowardly," Dale protested. "It would be purely a strategetic move, and it would save lives for us. For, when the Balls and their kinsmen come, you'll have to deliver me into their hands or

you'll have to fight like the very devil, that's sure; and, according to By Heck's figures, they outnumber you more than two to one."

"All right," Littleford replied, with a shrug of his huge shoulders. "Whatever you say, that same we'll do."

So By Heck was sent for, and shortly afterward he sneaked into the laurels and went off toward the settlement of the Balls. In the crook of his arm he carried his rifle, and inside his shirt he carried three pieces of dynamite all ready for the match—and he chose every step with great care for fear of jarring the explosive too much.

He had not been gone an hour when Bill Dale heard a dull, smothered roar from somewhere to the northward. Dale sprang up from his desk, ran to his ready and waiting horse, mounted and rode like a streak toward the lowland.

"Go to it, Fox!" he kept saying encouragingly to the young bay, after he had entered the old oxwagon road. "Go to it, Fox, my boy!"

Fox went to it willingly.

Dale arrived at John Moreland's big white farmhouse a little before the middle of the day, and halloed lustily at the gate. John Moreland and his two sons hurried out in response to the call. Dale waved aside all greetings and inquiries after his health, and told that which he had come to tell. The elder Moreland turned quickly to his two stalwart sons—

"Guns and hosses, boys! It'll be our last fight, and le's be at it and make it a good fight."

Less than five minutes later the three erstwhile

mountaineers rode out at the barnyard gate with full belts of cartridges around their waists and with repeating rifles across the pommels of their saddles, and joined Dale. The four hastened to the homes of the other Morelands; and not long afterward the old clan, in full strength, rode toward the big, dim-blue hills with Bill Dale acting as its leader. It was to be the clan's last fight, and a fight for a good cause, and every man of it was eager for the fray. . . . White-headed old Grandpap Moreland watched them out of sight with longing, wistful eyes; and when he could no longer see them, he went into the house and got down on his knees. . . .

Bill Dale bore himself proudly, and he rode like a man born to the saddle. He found a queer joy—a joy that brightened his steel-grey eyes and flushed his sun-burned cheeks, a joy that he didn't even attempt to understand—in the thought:

“For this one day I am a clan chief; I am leading my own people against a foe, in my own country——”

And so overwhelmingly did the idea take hold of him that he wished, even then, for the repeater that awaited him at his office back in the heart of the mountains. Once his conscience asked him a question—and he answered it with another question. Was he doing that which was right? Might not the Littlefords all be killed by those drunken cutthroats while he was waiting for the arrival of a company of militia from a city miles distant?

Anyway, the militia would fight. His clan would do no more than that. He satisfied his conscience quickly.

When they had reached the lower end of the cleared

valley, there came to them the sounds of slow firing, the firing of snipers. Each man kicked his horse's flanks and rode faster. When they came in sight of the besieged building, they saw puffs of powder-smoke rising lazily from the upper windows and from the mountain side above and to the right. Again they kicked the flanks of their horses and rode faster.

At John Moreland's old cabin they dismounted hastily and turned their horses into the drab meadow. With Dale still leading, they hurried on foot to the river's nearest bank and went rapidly, under cover of the thickly-standing sycamores, to a point within seventy yards of the office and supplies building. Then they made a dash across the open space, and Ben Littleford, with one arm bound up in a red-stained blue bandana, opened the door for them.

"Who else is hurt?" panted Dale.

"Little Tom," answered Littleford, "and Saul. Little Tom, he got a bullet onder the shoulder. Saul, he got one in might' nigh it the same place. They've riddled the whole t'other side o' the house to splinters. They're a-callin' fo' you."

"They'll get all they want of me," Dale growled.

He turned and ran up the rough stairway, and Ben Littleford and the Morelands followed close upon his heels. At the front and side windows, behind anything they had been able to find that would stop a bullet, knelt Littlefords with rifles in their hands, patiently watching for a human target to appear on the mountainside above. Saul and Little Tom lay in a corner, where they were fairly safe from chance bullets. Hayes had bound up their wounds as well as he could with the

material at hand. They were both white and helpless and suffering, but still full of the old Littleford fighting spirit.

Dale seized his Winchester and belt of cartridges from the hands of the man who had brought them to him, and turned to the others. A bullet crashed through the wall and struck the floor at his foot; he paid no attention to it.

"Listen to me, boys." He was buckling his cartridge-belt with rapid, steady fingers. "From where they are hiding, the Balls and Turners can hardly see the lower story of this building. We'll go downstairs, open the front door, and run to the edge of the laurels at the foot of the mountain. Then we'll turn to the right, make a wide detour, and get above the Ball outfit; we'll be fighting downhill instead of uphill. Get me? Are you all ready?"

To a man, they were ready.

They reached the thick undergrowth without being seen by the enemy. While the Balls and Turners fired more or less aimlessly at the building, drank white whisky and called drunkenly for the surrender to them of Bill Dale, Bill Dale and his men were making their way steadily in a wide half-circle up the side of David Moreland's Mountain.

Half an hour after they had left the office building, Dale had stationed his men, deployed as a line of skirmishers, behind sheltering trees some two hundred feet above the Balls and their kinsmen.

John Moreland, Ben Littleford and Bill Dale were not far apart. "It's a shame to do it," said Dale. "I swear, we can't shoot men in the back like this!"

John Moreland twisted his mouth into a queer smile of contempt, and so did Ben Littleford. They knew, far better than their leader, the ways of that people without a principle. The Balls and Turners wouldn't hesitate to shoot them in the back!

"Well," John Moreland replied, and it was almost a sneer, "ye might go down thar and give 'em some candy, and kiss 'em, and ax 'em won't they please surrender!"

Dale leaned around his tree, a great gnarled chestnut, and called boldly:

"You've got a chance to surrender now—and you'd certainly better take it quick!"

One of those below yelled surprisedly: "Who're *you*?" Then they all whipped to the other side of their sheltering timber.

The answer came at once: "I'm Bill Dale, and I'm peeved! You're at the mercy of the finest hill clan that ever looked along rifle barrels; will you surrender, or fight it out?"

"You said it—we'll fight it out!" cried a burly cousin of Black Adam Ball, deceased.

"You're on!" growled Bill Dale, slipping his rifle out beside the tree. "Give 'em hell, boys!"

He was unused to this sort of thing, and he was incautious. He showed a little too much of himself—there was a sudden keen report from below, and a bullet hole appeared in the rim of his hat! John Moreland fired the next shot, and he broke the right arm of the man who had just fired at Bill Dale. This opened the battle in earnest.

Soon the thunder of the many rifles became almost

a steady roar. The air was filled with the pungent odour of burning powder. Bill Dale emptied the magazine of his repeater, and sank behind the big chestnut to fill it again with cartridges from his belt. Bullets now whined on both sides of him; they cut greenish white furrows in the bark of both sides of the tree, and knocked up little spurts of black earth to his right and to his left; they cut off twigs within an arm's reach of him. A dozen Balls were now firing at him, seeking to avenge the death of their kinsman, the Goliath. John Moreland's strong voice came to him through the din and roar:

"Don't show no part o' yoreself now, Bill; ef ye do, ye'll shore be hit!"

Dale fired again, pumped a fresh cartridge into the chamber of his rifle and slipped another into the magazine, and arose behind the chestnut.

"Down, Bill!" cried John Moreland.

If Dale heard, he gave no sign of it. He fired four shots rapidly, and before the wind had carried away the blinding smoke he was behind another tree and shooting toward the Balls again. Soon there came a short, loud peal of laughter from his left; he turned his head and saw Ben Littleford taking a careful aim at a long angle toward the side of a boulder. Then Littleford fired, and a puff of stone dust showed that his bullet had gone true to its mark.

"What's that for?" demanded Dale. "We haven't any ammunition to throw away!"

"Why, Bill," replied Littleford, "didn't ye never bounce a bullet offen a rock and make it go towards a man ahind of a tree?"

It lasted hotly for two hours, but the casualties were comparatively few, because there was so much cover available. From the beginning the Balls and the Turners had the worst of it, which was due to uphill shooting, white whisky, and lack of the iron that makes real fighting men. The cartridges of those below were giving out; they had fired too many shots needlessly.

"It's about time to rush them," Dale said to John Moreland, who had crept up beside him.

"Jest give the word," Moreland nodded.

A few minutes later, Bill Dale sent the wings of his line down the mountainside, forming a half-circle of his force once more; then the whole line rushed, surrounded the enemy and called for a surrender.

But the Balls and their kinsmen wouldn't give in yet. They left their cover and started to run, found themselves facing Morelands and Littlefords in every direction, clubbed their rifles and fought. It was not true courage that prompted them to offer resistance thus: it was utter desperation; they had never been givers of mercy, therefore they did not expect mercy. Dale's men forebore to fire upon them, which was at Dale's command, and met them with clubbed rifles. The woodland rang with the sound of wood and steel crashing against wood and steel. Everywhere there were groans and threats and curses from the losing side, victorious cries and further demands for a surrender from the winners.

Bill Dale, ever a lover of fair combat, threw down his repeater to grapple with a big North Carolinian whose clubbed weapon had been knocked from his hands.

The two fell and rolled down the mountainside, locked in each other's arms.

And then one of the Balls struck Bill Dale across the head with the butt of his empty gun, and Bill Dale slackened his arms and lay as one dead.

He was lying under cover in a hand-carved black walnut fourposter, and it was night, when he opened his eyes again. Above him he saw the bearded faces of Ben Littleford and John Moreland, and they looked haggard and anxious in the oil lamp's yellow light. Suddenly Moreland spoke:

"Dead—nothin'!" jubilantly. "Look, Ben; he's done come to! Ye couldn't put him in a cannon and shoot him ag'inst a clift and kill him, Ben! I hope ye're a-feelin' all right, Bill, shore."

Dale realized everything quite clearly. He put a hand to his head; there was a wet cloth lying over the swollen place.

"He shore give ye a buster of a lick," drawled a voice that Dale instantly recognized as that of his worshipper, By Heck. "Danged ef Cale Moreland didn't might' nigh it beat him to death, Bill!"

Many men crowded to the bedside and smiled at him, and he smiled back at them. Soon he asked:

"Did you capture the outfit?"

"Every durned one of 'em," answered John Moreland. "They're all shet up tight in the downstairs o' the office buildin', onder gyard. The' ain't but one of 'em plumb teetotally dead, fo' a wonder; but the's a whole passel of 'em hurt. I've done sent Luke to town on hossback, atter a doctor fo' you and Saul and Little

Tom; and he can 'tend to them crippled Balls, too, I reckon, ef you think it's best. What're we a-goin' to do with them fellers, Bill?"

"We're going to take them to the Cartersville jail," Dale answered promptly.

"I had a different plan 'an that planned out, John," said By Heck, winking at Ben Littleford. "I had it planned out to hang 'em all on a big green hemlock as a Christmas tree fo' Bill! Some devilish rough Christmas Eve ye're a-havin', Bill, old boy, ain't it?"

"Rather," smiled Dale. He closed his eyes. His head ached, and he was somehow very tired.

Within the hour he went to sleep, and when he awoke it was daylight on Christmas morning. Ben Littleford, half dressed, was stirring the coals to life in the wide-mouthed stone fireplace. Dale felt better than he had expected to feel; he greeted Littleford with the compliments of the season, arose and dressed himself.

Littleford had just gone with a handful of kindling wood toward the kitchen, when there was a low, light tapping at the outside door of Bill Dale's room. Dale arose from his sheepskin-lined rocker before the cheery log fire, went to the door and opened it. Before him stood a slim, barefoot boy in the poorest of rags; in the pitifully slender arms there was something wrapped rather loosely in crumpled brown paper. Dale did not remember having seen the lad before, but he knew it was no Littleford.

"Come in, son," he invited cordially—"come in and warm yourself. My goodness alive, it's too cold to go barefooted like that! Haven't you any shoes, son?"

"Shoes?" muttered the boy, queerly. "Shoes?"

He was shivering from the cold. His thin face looked pinched and blue, his eyes big and hollow. Dale stooped, picked him up bodily, carried him to the old rocker he had just vacated, and put him into it with hands as gentle as any woman's.

"Hell," began the boy, staring hard—"what——"

"Now stick your feet out and warm them, son—that's it," and Dale chafed the poor little, dirty, half-frozen feet and legs.

"Son," he went on after a moment, his heart throbbing out of sheer pity, "you go to the commissary clerk and tell him to dress you up like the crown prince of England, if he's got it, and charge the same to the account of Bill Dale. It will be my Christmas gift to you, little boy. What's your name?"

The lad turned his surprised black eyes upon the face of the big and sunbrowned man.

"Are *you* Bill Dale?"

"Yes."

That which the boy said next struck the big and sunbrowned man with all the force of a bullet.

"So you're Bill Dale. Well, —— my soul!"

"Don't, buddy, don't!"

The boy went on: "My name, it's Henery. I come here with a Christmas gif' fo' you." He pointed a dirty forefinger toward the bundle in his lap. "But you ain't a-goin' to git it now."

"Why?" Dale asked smilingly.

"Why! Shoes—'at's why. Hell, did I ever have any shoes afore? Barefooted as a rabbit. That's me. Barefooted as a damn' rabbit!"

"Son," protested Bill Dale, "you're entirely too small to swear. You mustn't do it, y'know."

"Yes," quickly, "I'm small. I'm small to my age. I'm done twelve year old. I've been measured fo' the go-backs."

"Measured for the go-backs," laughed Dale—"what's that?"

"Why," soberly, "when ye grow littler 'stid o' bigger, ye've got the go-backs. Maw, she measured me with a yarn string out o' a stocking which had been wore by a woman seventy-seven year old, and 'en she wrapped the yarn string around the door-hinge. I'll 'gin to grow bigger, or die, one or t'other, afore the string wears out on the hinge. Bound to."

Again Dale laughed. Mountain superstitions always amused him. Ben Littleford came into the room, and Dale arose and faced him.

"Do you know this boy, Ben?"

"It's Lyss Ball's boy," answered Littleford, puckering his brows. "What's he a-doin' here?"

"He brought a Christmas present for me," said Dale, "but he has decided that I shan't have it."

"The only Christmas present you could git from a Ball would be a bullet," frowned Ben Littleford.

He stepped to the rocker and took the bundle from the boy's lap; he took away the crumpled brown paper—and there in his hands was a loaded and cocked revolver!

"By George!" exclaimed Bill Dale.

"What'd I tell ye?" smiled Ben Littleford.

An hour later Dale and a score of Littlefords and Morelands entered the big downstairs room of the

office and supplies building. The defeated Balls and Turners lounged here and there, sullen and silent, on the rough-board floor of their temporary prison.

Dale walked into their midst and addressed them quietly.

"You'll admit, won't you, that I've got what you fellows call 'the deadwood' on you? And that it lies in my power to send every single one of you to the State penitentiary?"

"I reckon so," admitted Adam Ball's father. He was pretty well cowed, and so were the others.

"But I've decided not to do it," went on Bill Dale. "I can't forget that this is Christmas Day. You may have your liberty as a present from the man you've tried so hard and so unjustly to kill. After the doctor gets through with Little Tom and Saul Littleford, he will come here to dress all your wounds; then our guards will give you back your rifles, and you may go home. I'm not asking you to promise me anything, you understand. I'm simply trusting the human heart, and I don't believe I'll be disappointed."

Dale turned to John Moreland. Moreland's rugged face wore a puzzled, displeased smile.

"If your brother David was here," Bill Dale demanded with a bare shade of anger in his voice, "what do you think he'd do about it? It's Christmas Day, isn't it?"

The old Moreland chief's countenance softened; his grey eyes brightened. "Yes," he said, "it's Christmas Day, Bill." He looked toward the Balls and Turners.

"Merry Christmas, gen'lemen!" he said.

Adam Ball's father immediately asked him for a chew of tobacco.

CHAPTER XXII

A PERFECT CROSS

ON the floor of the richly-furnished library of the Dale home, near a west window, Miss Elizabeth Littleford sat reading by the fast fading light of an early March afternoon. Somehow she liked to sit on the floor, and always she liked to read; for one thing, books helped her to forget that she was lonely.

There were footsteps behind her, soft footsteps because of the thick velvet carpet; then a low voice inquired:

"Aren't you afraid you will injure your eyes, Elizabeth? Better have a light, hadn't you, dear? The old coal king turned toward the switch on the wall.

"No!" she answered quickly. "I'm through reading for to-day, and I like this twilight."

Her improvement in speech and in manners had gone on at a surprisingly rapid rate. She rarely spoke with any but the simplest words, but she never fell into anything more than a bare semblance of the old drawling hill dialect unless it was while she was under the stress of some strong emotion.

She closed the book and looked up with eyes that were like the first stars in a summer sky. Her beauty was wonderful; it was finer and sweeter than it had ever been before.

Old Dale stood looking thoughtfully into her upturned face. He was a little pale, and he seemed troubled and uneasy.

Elizabeth shook her head. "You're worrying again!"

He dropped into a nearby chair, leaned slowly forward and let one hand fall gently on her thick and silky, chestnut-brown hair.

"I wish," he said as though to himself, "that I had a daughter like you."

He took his hand from her head, lay back wearily in his chair and closed his eyes. Then he bent forward again.

"The Morelands, Elizabeth—they've moved away from the settlement, haven't they?"

"Yes; Bill Dale has done wonderful things for them!" the girl answered.

John K. Dale was silent for a moment, after which he said suddenly: "I want to see my son; there is something I must tell him. Will you go with me, Elizabeth?"

"Of course, I'll go with you."

She thought she knew what it was that stirred him. By intuition, supplemented by Bill Dale's occasional cryptic utterances, and pieced out by hill tradition, Elizabeth Littleford gradually had come into possession of the old coal man's grim secret.

Neither of them knew that John Moreland was then visiting his beloved old hills for the sake of some shooting. . . .

The following day John K. Dale and Elizabeth Littleford alighted from a northbound passenger train at the Halfway Switch. The mountains were covered with

three inches of snow, and the hemlocks and pines bore heavy burdens of the beautiful white stuff; but the air was still, and it wasn't very cold.

"You'd get your clothing all black on the coal train," Dale said to his companion, "so you'd rather walk over, wouldn't you? Anyway, the train isn't here. I'm good for six miles, I think."

"Yes," smiled Ben Littleford's daughter, "I'd rather walk—if you're sure that six miles won't be too much for you."

Together, with the girl leading the way, they set out across David Moreland's Mountain. The old trail showed not one footprint ahead of them; it was not so much used now. They said little. Each thought his own thoughts, and neither cared to speak them to the other.

Just before they reached the mountain's crest, they passed a group of snow-laden pines that concealed a big, brown-bearded man who had been stealthily following the trail of a lone wild turkey. He wore khaki hunting-clothes and high laced boots, and there was a certain English fineness about him. In his bare hands he carried a repeating rifle, which marked him as one born in the hills; a lowlander would have had a choke-bored shotgun.

When he saw John K. Dale he stopped suddenly. It might have been intuition, or it might have been sheer curiosity, the average hillman being a stranger to neither—he followed and watched the two, unseen by them.

On the pine-fringed crest, Elizabeth Littleford halted to view that which lay around and below them. Old

Dale stopped close at her side, and he, too, looked at that which lay around and below them; and to his mind also there came memories crowding.

The young woman brushed back a wayward wisp of brown hair and turned to the man beside her.

"The Moreland part o' the settlement looks lonesome, don't it?" she said. "See, there's no smoke comin' from their cabin chimneys. . . ." She went on absently, "But the Littlefords are there yet."

Old Dale caught the meaning that was in the latter sentence. It was not a shallow meaning.

"We are going to take care of the Littlefords, Elizabeth," he assured her. "I've thought much over it, and just now I've decided. When I decide, it's for all time; you know that, don't you?"

A great gladness filled Elizabeth's heart. It did not occur to her to ask how, in what manner, he was going to take care of her people; it was enough to know that he was going to take care of them. He put a father's arm lightly around her shoulders. She tried to speak, choked, and couldn't utter a word. But it didn't matter. John K. Dale understood perfectly.

Then he took his arm away, faced to the right, and drew his hat rim low over his eyes. For two minutes he stood there and looked for the little old cabin down near the foot of the north end of the mountain, and he failed to find it. His mind had gone back once more to that woeful night that had cut his life in twain. He remembered plainly waking in the early morning with an aching head and with the rankling taste of much dead whisky in his mouth. Remembered seeing David Moreland, with a bullet hole through and

through him, lying on the floor beside him. Remembered his horror, and his smothered cries of anguish, and his hurried flight. * . *

He had wondered, he remembered, why the law made no attempt to track him down. He had not known that the mountaineer's code of honour demands that the mountaineer himself collect that which is due him.

"Tell me," he said in tones so low that Elizabeth barely heard, "where is David Moreland buried?"

He had turned, and stood facing her. She pointed to the southward.

"They buried him out the crest o' the mountain a little ways, on the highest place, by the side of his wife. That was always a touchin' thing to me, that he buried his wife on the very highest point of his own mountain. You know why, don't you? David Moreland believed in God and a hereafter, and he believed that heaven was *up*. He wanted to get even his wife's ashes as close to heaven as he could."

"I—I'd like to go out there," John Dale said, his voice almost a whisper. "I'd like to see the place."

"I wouldn't," replied Ben Littleford's daughter. For she knew—oh, she knew.

"Yes, yes, my dear—I must see the place," declared John K. Dale, hoarsely whispering—"let's go out there."

There was never any disobeying him when he was determined, and he was determined now. It is strange, that dread human thing that drew him—

Elizabeth turned and started out the snowy crest of the mountain, wending her way here and there between clumps of snow-heavy laurel and ivy and under

snow-heavy pines. After a quarter of an hour of this somewhat difficult travelling, the two drew up before a small enclosure made of round oaken posts and round open railings and hand-split and pointed oaken palings as high as a man's shoulders, all of which were grey and weatherbeaten. Elizabeth knew the spot well. She swung the gate stiffly open on its wooden hinges and stepped inside. Old Dale, trembling in every fibre, followed her. His face was very, very pale.

Before them were two snow-covered mounds bordered with the dead stalks of flowers of another year—marigolds, pretty-by-nights, zinnias. Near the two graves there grew bare-branched wild honeysuckle and redbud, and green-leaved laurel, which in the summertime were covered with beautiful and fragrant blossoms of golden yellow, royal purple, and waxen white. At the head of one mound a great, roughly-shaped slab of brown sandstone marked the last resting place of David Moreland's young wife; it had been lettered by David Moreland himself, and it was a crude but sincere tribute to womankind.

On the face of the other great slab of brown sandstone were chiselled other ill-shaped letters and misspelled words. The hands of John Moreland had done this. Old John Dale stepped unsteadily closer and read—

HEAR LAYS DAVID MORELAND

THE BEST MAN GOD

EVVER MAID

KILLED

A PERFECT CROSS

223

BY JOHN K CARLILE

MAY GOD

DAM HIS

SOLE

It was a living curse, a breathing curse—a terrible anathema. If dead David Moreland himself had arisen from the tomb and uttered it, it would not have struck John K. Dale with greater force. He grew weak, as though with a fatal sickness. He sank to his knees in the snow, and his iron-gray head fell forward to his breast. Elizabeth Littleford quickly knelt in the snow beside him. She tried to find comforting words, for she loved him and was sorry for him, but no words would come.

There was a slight sound, the muffled breaking of a dry twig in the snow just beyond the palings in front of them. Elizabeth Littleford looked up to see the giant figure of John Moreland, whose face was white and whose eyes were filled with the fire of hate and anger, who held a rifle in his cold, bare hands. The rifle's hammer came back, and the fine trigger caught it with a faint click.

Moreland took another step forward and levelled the weapon across the palings.

"Ef it was any use fo' ye to pray, Carlyle," he said, and his voice was shaking and hoarse and choked, "Td give ye time. But it ain't no use at all. Look up. Face it. Try to be a man fo' one second in yore low-down life."

Old Dale raised his head, saw David Moreland's brother, and realized all there was to realize. His eyes widened a little; then a look of relief flitted across his heavy countenance.

"Shoot and even up the score," he said bravely, and his head was high. "According to your code, it is just. And I'll be able to forget at last, at last. So shoot and settle the account."

Moreland winced perceptibly. The big, crooked finger came away from the hair-fine trigger. He had never expected to hear the man whom he knew as John K. Carlyle say that which he had just said. It had never entered his mind that John K. Carlyle could be sorry.

Then the great and bitter desire for revenge rushed into his brain again, and his head went down, and his keen right eye looked along the sights and to the kneeling man's breast. His trigger finger began slowly to crook—

Until this instant Elizabeth Littleford had been as one frozen, had been as a figure carved in stone. Now she sprang to her feet and went between Moreland and his ancient enemy.

"Put 'at gun down—wait ontel I tell ye, John Moreland, what I've got to tell ye!" she cried tensely, lapsing into the old dialect in her excitement. While Moreland stared, she went on:

"It wasn't Newton Wheatley 'at put up the money to start yore coal mine a-goin': it was this man here! And the Alexander Crayfield Coal Corp'ration—which has been a-payin' you two prices fo' yore coal—that was this man here! Mr. Hayes was his—his ally

through it all. And he's sorry, John Moreland, this man is—so sorry that he *wants* to die; and cain't ye see it, John Moreland?"

She caught her breath again and continued tearfully: "Oh, he don't deserve to be killed, and ef he did—you're too good a man to kill him. He's done paid—you don't know, like I do, how he's paid. You mustn't fo'get that. And you mustn't fo'get Bill Dale, his son. Put down that gun, John Moreland! Yore people is saved, as David wanted 'em saved. Now d-d-don't go and s-s-spoil it all, fo' God's sake!"

The big mountaineer's eyes were wide with amazement, for Elizabeth Littleford's every word had borne the ring of truth. He was too dazed to understand her allusion to Bill Dale as his old enemy's son. The rifle came back from across the palings, and its steel-shod butt found a place in the snow beside John Moreland's foot.

Slowly John K. Dale arose and drew close to him, and then from John K. Dale's soul came pouring the pent-up anguish of remorse that had seared it through the years. The torrent of words flowed on, while the mountaineer stood rigidly regarding him with a strange light in his piercing eyes.

"I can't ask you to forgive me," Dale finished brokenly. "I don't expect forgiveness; my crime was too great. But can't you, for the sake of the boy, let me keep on trying to atone for my sin?"

John Moreland looked long and searchingly into the face of the pleading man before him. The bitter struggle that was going on within him was mirrored on his rugged countenance. But gradually the bitter-

ness faded; his huge frame trembled; he put a hand slowly down on the other's shoulder.

"The boy," he muttered—"Bill Dale: is he yore boy? Yore name was Carlyle then——"

"My boy, yes—my boy, Bill Dale. Carlyle is an old family name. My father was at the head of a big coal concern; he sent me down here incognito to get a line on the Moreland vein. Maybe he thought the price would be high if it were known that he wanted it; I don't know. I—I can't remember."

Ben Littleford's daughter was watching closely, hoping against hope, praying to heaven with all her heart; and then she saw John K. Dale put his right hand up to John Moreland's hand, take it and press it—and she saw John Moreland, his bearded mouth jerking, give the answering squeeze that meant something very akin to forgiveness.

She ran out at the gate, ran up to the giant hillman and put her arms around his neck; she drew his great brown head down and kissed him on the cheek. And John Moreland let his rifle fall unnoticed to the snow, put his arms around her shoulders as though she were his own daughter, bowed his head and sobbed out a few words that she did not understand.

Night had fallen when they reached Ben Littleford's cabin home. The girl was welcomed with much joy; old Dale was received with almost affectionate cordiality. A roaring fire was soon going in the best room, and old Dale was given the cosiest of the sheepskin-lined rockers. Ben Littleford, washed scrupulously clean of coal smut, sat near the guest of honour, John More-

land, who was so thoughtful that he seemed to hear and see nothing, sat close to Ben Littleford.

Suddenly Dale looked toward his host and asked: "Where is my son?"

At that moment Dale the younger, in boots and corduroys, appeared in the outer doorway and answered for himself:

"Here he is, father. Are you well?"

Dale the elder arose, and their hands clasped warmly. Young Dale then shook hands with Elizabeth, who blushed in spite of herself as she faced him.

"How are you, Babe?" he said in the old, boyish way, using the name that was sweet to her only when he uttered it. He ran on smilingly: "I wonder if it's bad manners to tell you that you get prettier every blessed minute of your life? If it is, I didn't say it, you understand—though that wouldn't keep it from being true!"

To hide her confusion, Elizabeth turned to the tall and lanky By Heck, who had come in behind Bill Dale.

"How are you, By?" she greeted him.

"Hongry," grinned By Heck, taking her hand awkwardly. "I never e't nothin' but a couple o' baked 'possums and a peck or two o' sweet 'taters fo' dinner, and I've been as busy as the dev—as thunder a-doin' nothin' ever sence. Doin' nothin' shore does make me hongry, M-M-M-Miss Babe."

Supper was announced, and they went into a long, log-walled room that served as both kitchen and dining-room. There were a great many savoury dishes, and one of them was a roast wild turkey that John More-

land had shot the day before at a distance of a hundred yards—with a rifle.

Bill Dale sat beside his father and talked of nothing but coal veins—big and little coal veins, long and short, broad and narrow, deep and shallow, blue and black coal veins. Babe Littleford, who wouldn't marry him, who had come back to the hills to torture him with a beauty that he had never believed possible in any woman, shouldn't know that he was even thinking of her!

He talked coal with his father until bedtime, and he was wiser in the ways of the black diamond when nine o'clock came. After Ben Littleford had haltingly conducted family prayers—and in this he mentioned even the Balls, Turners and Torreys—Bill Dale bade them all good night and started for his office to sleep rolled in a blanket on the floor. There was a lack of beds at Ben Littleford's that night.

A little later, John Moreland drew old Ben out to the cabin yard. The skies were clear, and the moon was shining brightly; everywhere there was beauty and peacefulness.

"Ben," softly, "I've got to bother ye a minute, as late as it is. I want ye to find me a hammer and a chisel and a lantern."

"I've got 'em all three right thar in the house," replied Littleford. "But what'n the name o' Torment and thunderation do ye want with a hammer and a chisel and a lantern, John, old friend?"

The answer came straightforwardly. It was the Moreland way.

"I'm a-goin' up thar to whar pore David he's buried

at, and cut off some them letters offen the stone, Ben. I cain't sleep ontel it's done. You can guess what part I'm a-goin' to cut off, caint ye?"

"Yes," said Littleford. "Babe told me about what happened up thar afore dark. And I'm pow'ful glad ye're a-goin' to do it, John, old friend."

He went with Moreland to the little enclosure on the highest point of David Moreland's Mountain. He held the lighted lantern while Moreland worked. They were there for hours.

When the work was finished David Moreland's brother arose from his knees in the snow, put the hammer and the chisel into his pocket, and spread open his cold, cramped fingers.

"Ef David could know," he said wearily, "I believe he'd be glad 'at ye done it, John. The' hain't no doubt."

Ben Littleford put a big hand on John Moreland's shoulder.

"Yes," he agreed, "ef David could know about it, he'd be glad 'at ye done it, John. The' hain't no doubt o' that. And who can say he don't know about it?"

Elizabeth learned of it early on the following morning. When breakfast was over, she whispered to John K. Dale that there was something she *had* to show him. She wouldn't tell him anything in advance. So he went with her to see for himself.

When at last they stood inside the weatherbeaten palings, Elizabeth pointed and said:

"Look there, and thank God!"

Dale looked and saw. The colour left his face, then came back. He shut his eyes, swayed a little on his

feet, opened his eyes, looked and saw again. He turned to the young woman with a great joy shining on his face.

"I haven't been so glad," he told her, "for twenty-five years."

The chiselling away of the lower five lines had not only obliterated the curse: it had left an almost perfect cross. Then John Moreland's bare, cold and tireless hands had gone to work and made it, in every respect, a perfect cross.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END OF IT ALL

THE sun shone very brightly that day, and the snow began to melt on the places that were not shaded. When he returned with Elizabeth from the crest of David Moreland's Mountain, John K. Dale took a rocker before the fire and sat there thinking, thinking, until the midday meal was announced. When the midday meal was over, he resumed his chair and sat there thinking, thinking, until the afternoon was half gone.

Then he called Elizabeth to him.

"Will you go to my son and tell him I wish to see him?" he said. And he added under his breath: "I think it is best that they should know."

Elizabeth heard that which he had said to himself as well as she heard that which he had said to her. Should know! Know what? She had a sudden wild fear that Mrs. Dale had broken her promise never to breathe a word of the truth concerning the Adam Ball affair. Nevertheless, she put on her hat and her gloves and went to Bill Dale's office.

Dale sat with his elbows on his desk and with his head in his hands. To all appearances, he was unaware of the presence of the girl in the doorway.

She spoke. "Bill?"

He sat up straight and faced her. He seemed surprised.

"Well, Babe?"

"Your father wants you," in a low voice. "He's got something to tell you that—that will make you think almost nothing of me!"

Young Dale frowned. "What is it?"

"I'd rather he'd tell you about it. Bill Dale, I don't think I could bear to tell you myself——"

She turned and was about to hasten away, when he called to her: "Wait!"—and she waited.

"Has it," he asked, "anything to do with your marriage to Jimmy Fayne?"

"No!"

He arose and put on his broad-rimmed hat. "I'll admit," he smiled, "that I'm worse than a granny woman for poking my nose into other people's affairs—when are you going to marry Jimmy, Babe?"

The answer came quickly: "Never."

"Never!"

"Never," repeated Elizabeth, very quietly.

"*Never?*" pursued Dale.

"NEVER!" cried Elizabeth, exasperated.

"Goodness!" laughed Dale. "You're dramatic, or vehement, or both. May I walk home with you, Babe?"

"Yes, sir," promptly, "if you want to."

They set out across the snow-covered meadows, and neither spoke another word until they had reached Ben Littleford's log house. The girl looked at him queerly as they entered. After he knew—

Old Dale still sat before the fire, and near him sat

silent John Moreland. Old Dale motioned toward an inside door.

"Please close it, Elizabeth," he requested, and she obeyed. "Now sit down. I've got something to tell the three of you. And I fancy it will interest all of you."

The two who had just come in took chairs at the fireside. After a moment, John K. Dale began:

"You've often wondered, Bill, about that savage streak—as you choose to call it—that is in you. You inherited it. Much of that which we are, it is claimed, is inherited, and it must be correct; like begets like, of course. But there is no savage streak in you, Bill. You are hot-headed, that's all. Your virtues overbalance that, by far. I have never seen another man who had a greater love for honesty and fair play, or a greater hatred for all that is hollow and false, or more courage to stick up for that which seems to be right, than you. Now I'll tell you how you came by those fine qualities and the hot-headedness——"

Elizabeth Littleford sat wide-eyed, tense, half breathless. If he meant to tell it, why didn't he tell it! Why did he beat about the bush like that?

"Bill, this is hard for me. It brings back a terrible thing. You know about David Moreland. . . . When I awoke that morning and found him lying dead at my crazed, drunken hands, I wished that I, too, were dead. . . . That great and silent wilderness smothered me. I imagined that I could hear voices calling to me, saying——

"'Cain! Cain!"

"They came from the laurel thickets, from the trees overhead, from the ground, from everywhere. You see,

I wasn't all bad, even in my wild-oats days. Then I thought of the law, and I ran. . . .

"But the cry of a child from the cabin I was leaving halted me before I had gone thirty yards. David Moreland's wife had left him with a baby only a few weeks old, which I didn't pay any particular attention to until that morning, that black morning. At that time there was no other house for miles around. I couldn't leave the child there to die of starvation, after killing its father. So I went back and got the baby, and all its clothing, and took it away with me. I left it at a farmhouse down in the lowland, and went to another city, and started life afresh. . . .

"But later I married, and shortly after that I went to the farmer and persuaded him to let me adopt the child. I brought it up as my own, and educated it, as a sort of compensation. And I came to love it. But it was years before my wife loved it. She didn't like children then. But she does now. She is paying now, and I am paying. Don't you understand, Bill—don't you understand?"

There was a choke in his voice toward the last. Bill Dale went to his feet. His eyes were wide, but he did not seem unhappy; and for that Elizabeth was grateful. John Moreland sat as still, with his bearded, viking face as expressionless as though he had known it all along.

"And so I really am *in my own country!*" cried Bill Dale. "I am a Moreland, and the Morelands really are my own people!"

"Yes, you are in your own country, and you are a

Moreland—and your baby name was David,” said John K. Dale.

It was then that John Moreland spoke.

“Bill, when I fust seed you, you made me think o’ my brother the day he was married. I ain’t never fo’got that. I sartainly ain’t su’prised none at all. We didn’t know about the baby. Cherokee Joe told me the baby had died.”

“And now, son,” pleaded old Dale, his voice breaking, “say that you forgive me.”

Bill Dale, David Moreland’s boy, knelt beside the old sheepskin-lined rocker, took the old coal king’s hand in both his own and bent his head over it.

“It’s all right,” he said thickly. “It’s all right.”

Elizabeth Littleford arose and stole blindly out of the house. Her footsteps led her, quite without her realizing where she was going, across the meadow and to the river above the blown-down sycamore. And there on that sacred spot, where she had first felt her heart leap at the sound of Bill Dale’s voice, she sank down in a heap in the snow and cried, and cried.

Twilight was gathering rapidly, but she did not notice it. She did not notice, either, that the air was growing steadily colder with the approach of the mountain night. To her a warm sun was shining above in a bright blue vault; to her the spirit of summer was everywhere; in her ears there was the liquid song of a meadow lark, the sweet twittering of woodthrushes, the low humming of wild bees. The pouring of the crystal waters between the two boulders above the pool made music to her, and blended with it she seemed to hear the voice of a big, clean, strong man—

"I was thinking of the difference between you and some other women I know."

Then a ray of hope shone into her heart. Bill Dale was really a Moreland and, therefore, of the hill blood even as she was of the hill blood, and that should make them more nearly equal. She told herself that he wouldn't be so apt to condemn her for being able to take a human life easily as one of another blood would be; he would be more apt to understand. And yet, the women he had known were gentle, tender and refined, like, for instance, Patricia McLaurin. Soon the ray of hope died within her, and she bent her head and sobbed again.

One of her bare hands began to grope idly in the snow at her side, and she did not feel the cold. Suddenly she realized that her hand was full of shavings, whittlings. Some man had been sitting there whittling with a pocket-knife—it must have been a man, for who ever heard of a woman whittling? She felt in the snow with both hands, and found more whittlings—there were bushels of whittlings, it seemed to her, lying there under the snow.

Then she wondered—wondered who it could have been.

It was quite dark now, for the moon was not yet up. A great, bright star blazed above David Moreland's tomb like a beacon fire. She heard the muffled sounds of slow masculine footsteps in the snow behind her. She did not turn her head. In her soul she knew it could be but one man.

Bill Dale's head was down, and he moved as though he neither knew nor cared whither he went. Then he

saw the dark heap on the river's bank before him, and he halted. He knew in his soul that it could be but one woman.

Dale went on and sat down on a stone the size of a small barrel that lay at the river's rim.

"Babe?" he said. It was the mating call of his heart in the springtime of his life.

"Who d-done all o' this whittlin', Bill?" asked Elizabeth.

"I did," softly.

"But I thought you were so busy here! It's nobody but idlers, of course, that whittles—that is, most o' the time it's nobody but idlers that whittles."

"But I'm not busy on Sundays, y'know," replied Dale.

"Tell me this," Elizabeth asked pointedly: "What made you come to this one spot to do your whittlin'? Couldn't you whittle up there in my daddy's cabin yard?"

He answered her unhesitatingly: "Because I like to be here. This place is a shrine to me. It was here that I first loved you, Babe. Now you tell me this: Why did you come to this particular spot to sit down in the snow? There's snow in your daddy's cabin yard!"

Said Elizabeth, in a voice that sounded smothered: "Because I like to be here—this place is a shrine to me, too—it was here that I first loved you, Bill Dale?"

"Then why," he demanded, "won't you marry me?"

"Because it was me that shot—Adam Ball."

She went on, and though emotion had set every fibre of her to quivering, she did not fall into the old hill talk, which was proof of the magnificence of her:

"I thought you wouldn't want me if you knew that I did that, and I couldn't marry you without telling you. But you know now! And do whatever you feel like doing or saying, you can't hurt me; I can never be hurt any—any m-m-m-more——"

Bill Dale shot erect. Truly, this was a day of surprises for him. He stooped and caught her up.

"A real woman!" he said happily, straightening with her in his arms. "A real, all gold, pure gold woman! You loved me well enough to kill a man to save me, and wouldn't let me know it! Woman is a mystery, sure enough. But perhaps it's because women are so fine and so far above menfolk that menfolk cannot understand them. Well, Babe, kitten, must I drag you to the altar, or will you go with me of your own accord?"

She put her arms around his neck and drew them tight.

"I'd go with you, Bill Dale—or David Moreland, whichever it is—to the very last inch of the end of the world," she said.

Early the next morning, there came strolling lazily up the river's bank a tall and lanky mountaineer who wore, among other things, a Niagara Falls moustache and cowhide boots that seemed ridiculously short because of the great length of his slender legs. He carried a rifle in the hollow of one arm; he was looking for rabbit-tracks in the snow. Near the pool above the blown-down sycamore, he came upon tracks that had not been made by any four-footed animals. There were the footprints of a man coming from one direction,

and the footprints of a woman coming from another direction; only the footprints of the man went away toward Ben Littleford's cabin.

By Heck was puzzled. "Here comes Bill," he frowned, "and over here comes Babe. And thar, as plain as day, goes Bill; but what become o' Babe? Whar in the name o' the devil's pet ridin'-hoss did *she* go to? Not straight up, shorely!"

He scrutinized the signs with the understanding eye of the born woodsman. Then he grinned broadly and said to himself:

"Well, dang my forrard and blast my eyes! The danged old Injun, he jest picked her up bod'ly and carried her off home, and I know what that means, thank God. I cain't pray, but I shore can sing——

"Oh, when I die, don't-a bury me deep
Put no tombstone at my head and feet
Put a bear's jawbone in my right hand
On my way to the Prom—ised La-a-and
Oh! On my way to the Promised Land!"

THE END



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